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Novelets

A MAGAZINE OF ACTION

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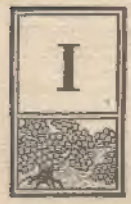
JANUARY NOVELETS ON THE STANDS DECEMBER 15

The Red Domino

By Paul Deresco Augsburg

In the Rout and Revelry of a New Orleans Carnival, the Red Hand of Cain Strikes, Smearing a First Family with the Stain of Scandal

Complete Detective Action Novel)



T was a strange hour for a murder. . . .

The spirit of old New Orleans, city of romance, hovered over the Southern metropolis that night. It seemed as if the shades of bygone revelers had returned—bizarre costumes, masks, light hearts and all—to sport once more within the crescent of the silent-flowing Mississippi. With the first dusk of twilight, long before the flaming torches appeared in the upper lane of St. Charles Street, came that spell of long ago. Half close your eyes and you could almost see the hoop skirts and high beavers of another century there on the balconies above the sidewalk.

Then the strains of a band, the tossing of flambeaux, the excited standing on tiptoe, the soft laughter of women. The first float had passed Lee Circle, where the great Confederate leader stands aloft on his high granite pedestal. The band was drawing closer; the tune was just becoming distinguishable "'Tuck Home"—that's what they were playing. Someone in the crowd began to hum it.

The quiet voice of an Orleanian, explaining things to a tourist from the North, came distinctly to my ears. Involuntarily I listened.

"This Krewe of Proteus is one of the oldest of the carnival societies," he was saying. "It's made up of the most illustrious families in the city—society men, you know, blue bloods from 'way back. Membership is secret."

"Secret, eh?" repeated the other, with interest.

"Oh, yes. When the floats pass by you'll notice that every man wears a mask. No one's supposed to know their identity—not even the young ladies who dance with them at the Proteus Ball. The invitations are sent out anonymously, with only a postoffice number given for the acceptance. They won't take off their masks all evening."

"Won't, eh?" said the affable Northerner. "Gosh, I'll bet they're uncomfortable."

A murmur from the throngs which packed the sidewalks. The first band was passing now, followed by a plumed and masked herald on horseback. Then four blasé mules, draped in white and led by stolid negroes wearing robes to match. Behind the mules came the royal float, a glittering castle in green and white, with King Proteus perched on the parapet throwing kisses to the crowd. His scepter sparkled in the flare from the gasoline flambeaux, borne by other stolid, white-robed negroes.

But the king did not take my eye so much as the grotesque, purple figure of a halberdier, who stood before a miniature portcullis on the side of the regal float. It was the comical expression of his mask that first caught my attention. The face was so ludicrously solemn that

it provoked an uproar of laughter all along the route.

"Hey, mister, your expression's slipping," yelled a man at my elbow; and the halberdier, dancing comically to the music of two bands, brandished his spear at the fellow. But he did not speak a word.

Then the float passed on and others followed in its place. The atmosphere throbbed with melody. Flags and banners, overhanging the street, took on weird hues as the flambeaux caught them for one bright instant, then left them in semi-shadow once again. St. Charles Street had become a resplendent avenue of fairyland.

Later, after the blasé mules and stolid negroes and gaudy floats had returned in stately procession to the "den," this fairy revelry was transferred to the ballroom floor. Here, hidden by ferns and potted palms, two orchestras alternated in playing dreamy music, while dukes and chamberlains, knights and archers, heralds and fools in motley passed in colorful review.

Only members of the Krewe and their ladies were allowed on the ballroom floor. The rest of us, a hundred or more in all, were merely favored spectators. Clad in evening dress, all we could do was watch and murmur and tap our feet in time to the music.

As the grand march proceeded around the floor, I noticed that there were two halberdiers, identically costumed, instead of merely one. Their masks were also alike, cast in that same ludicrous expression which had aroused so much mirth during the parade. They were still causing comment.

"Lord, what a droll face!" said a familiar voice at my side. I turned to find Thomas Loring smiling pleasantly in greeting. The popular movie star had come to New Orleans especially to see the Mardi Gras and the elaborate festivities which always precede it. During my interview with him, only the night before, he had told me of his intention to produce a picture with our glittering carnival pageantry as a background.

We talked for scarcely more than a minute, up there above the madcap maskers. Just a few commonplace remarks, and then some gushing admirer led him away from me. When I saw Loring again, less than half an hour later, he was lying dead—lying in a heap at the foot of the balcony stairs, with blood streaked across the bosom of his full dress shirt and his mouth fixed in an expression of startled agony!

The hall was in an uproar. Women were shrieking, fainting, sobbing. Court fools and belted knights were rushing about the floor in a bedlam of excitement. Masked archers and chamberlains were mingled with twentieth century bankers and merchant princes who had hurried down from the balcony. One young woman was crying hysterically over and over again:

"The halberdier did it! The halberdier did it! The halberdier did it!"

Detective Johnny Lee—"Handsome Johnny," who was always assigned to these high social functions because of his Chesterfieldian features—rushed up just behind me.

"Halberdier? What does she mean, halberdier?" he demanded.

"There!" I shouted. "There's the halberdier, walking toward that fat man. And there's another," I added quickly. "Gosh, I wonder *which* halberdier it was?"

CHAPTER II

THE HUNT BEGINS

"MASKER Murders Thomas Loring!"

Thus ran the eight-column "screamer" which the staid, dignified *Louisianan* carried in the morning. Never since the Armistice was declared had the decorous old journal of the Southland startled its readers with such a display of type. And never, I suppose, since those trying days when General Butler held the Confederate metropolis under martial law, has New Orleans been so stunned.

". . . when the lights flashed on, he was stretched dead on the floor"

A murder committed on the very eve of Mardi Gras! A famous movie star stabbed to death in the midst of a high carnival ball! Two members of society's innermost circle, wealthy scions of ancient Creole families, held on charges of murder! The eyes of the entire world brought to a sudden startled focus upon this "city that care forgot"! Do you wonder that the *Louisianan* grew a bit giddy and ran an eight-column line that morning?

As the darkness passed and dawn turned to balmy day, the mystery of Loring's murder grew deeper and deeper. Throughout a long night of grilling, each of the two prisoners earnestly protested his innocence; nor was their assurance broken with fatigue or the monotonous iteration of the questioning.

"I tell you, on my word as a gentleman, that I did not kill Loring or have any cause to kill him," declared René Bonnet evenly, looking his inquisitors straight in the eye. The clock over the Criminal District Court building, beside the Parish Prison, was striking five—seven hours after the mysterious killing of the movie star. Millions in the Eastern section of the country would soon be arising and reading the startling details in their morning papers. A few more hours and the entire nation would be breathlessly discussing the murder of a favorite.

"Gentlemen"—this from Charles LeFevre, the other prisoner, some ten or fifteen minutes later—"as God is my judge, I had nothing to do with stabbing that poor fellow. I've said it a

hundred times, and you can't make me say otherwise, for my conscience is absolutely clear."

The detectives were in a quandary. Twelve witnesses had been collected who saw the murder of Thomas Loring. All of them were positive in declaring that a purple halberdier, wearing a full-face mask, had plunged the knife. Yet how were they to know one from the other? A careful examination of the two costumes revealed only a single difference. That of LeFevre had a green ribbon pinned to the left sleeve, while Bonnet's ribbon was yellow. But none of the excited witnesses had noticed such a minor detail as that.

Note the least puzzling of the whole mystery was the fact that each of the prisoners, seemingly clear of all guilt in his own mind, thought the other was the murderer. Not that either tried by accusation or by hint to place the blame on his fellow masker. No, they betrayed their beliefs in a mutual questioning glance when first they were brought face to face by the detectives. Each was reading the other to see what signs of guilt were there. And each seemed startled by what he saw—apparent innocence.

Such was the situation on the morning of Mardi Gras—the day, of all days, when New Orleans loses all care in one joyous fling of gayety before the drab ushering in of Lent. But New Orleans was not carefree on this Tuesday. Her gay spirit of sans souci had fled with the news of the awful tragedy. The city, shocked and awed, was like a frolicsome child who comes suddenly upon a robin lying dead among the leaves.

The great Rex parade, so magnificent in all its pomp and mummery, seemed like a funeral procession of old Cathay. The bands played as usual, the bearded monarch of misrule saluted his queen and drank her health in bubbles, the maids of honor smiled down from the Boston Club balcony, the floats glittered and sparkled beneath a genial Southern sun. Outwardly all was as it should be; but even the uninitiated tourist from the North, who never before had seen a Mardi Gras, sensed that something vital was missing. The spirit of carnival was dead. Though the calendar said Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday had already descended in spirit upon the city.

As the Rex procession advanced down Charles Street at noonday, detectives watched with furtive attention every movement of the masqueraders and their restless spectators. Why they watched, they themselves could scarcely say. They were mystified, bewildered by the strangeness of the crime, a bit unnerved at the calmness of their two captives. The entire world was looking to them for a solution of the crime, and they hardly knew where to turn. Perhaps something—a clue, even an intangible hint which might later develop into a concrete and definite fact — would appear during the course of the parade.

But after the last strains of "If Ever I Cease to Love," the sovereign song of Rex, had vanished with the horns of the final band; after the last float had rumbled back to the "royal den"; after the curious thousands had drifted away from Canal Street for an afternoon at race track or private celebration, the disconsolate investigators came back with nothing to report but failure.

Chief Dollar paced his office in vexation, having just questioned the prisoners for the dozenth time since their arrest. The captain of detectives looked moodily out of the window and said nothing.

"One of those fellows is guilty as all hell," snapped the Chief, turning upon Jim Turner of the *Item* and myself. "But which one? *Which* one?"

"The one that did the stabbing," grinned Turner affably. "Why don't you third degree 'em, Chief? That's the only way you'll get your man, I tell you —by a confession."

"Not a chance; not with *those* babies!" growled the Chief. "Their families got more influence in this town than the governor. What kind of a job

would I have left if I put *them* through a third degree, *huh?*"

"Oh, you might be allowed to travel beat out by the New Basin Canal," came Turner's cheerful assurance. "You might even work up to be a corporal after a while, Chief. Cheer up!"

At that moment a special delivery letter was brought to Dollar. He stared vacantly at the envelope and ripped it open. Mechanically, still glumly talking, he began to read. And then his eyes suddenly opened wide and his manner grew brisk.

"Here's a dip says LeFevre did it. I'll take a chance, Turner. I'll put LeFevre through the third degree."

Then he showed us the letter, written in a large careless scrawl on stationery of the St. Charles Hotel:

Dear Chief Dollar,

The halberdier that wore the green ribbon killed Thomas Loring. I saw him do it, and I noticed the ribbon flap just as the knife came down. I can't sign my name, Chief, as I didn't have any business being at the ball last night and I'm not anxious to be arrested. The only reason I'm telling you is because you treated me decent one time when I was booked for picking pockets.

CHAPTER III

"LIPS . . . TOO FULL AND RED"

JIM TURNER and Dollar are scarcely on speaking terms any more, for the investigation which ultimately followed the latter's inquisition of Charles LeFevre resulted in his demotion to a captaincy. What he did to LeFevre within the thick walls of the Parish Prison was nothing short of criminal. At the conclusion of two hours, that hapless recipient of the third degree looked no more like a Creole gentleman of proud New Orleans than does dusty Brakebeams of No-where-in-particular-on-the-Erie after an encounter with a railroad detective. But never once in all that sordid session did LeFevre waver in his declaration of innocence.

The day after Mardi Gras both he and Bonnet were released on bond, and the detectives floundered blindly on in the frantic hope of discovering some incriminating evidence. That either LeFevre or Bonnet had murdered Loring seemed patent; but how to determine the guilty one and then convict him was a mystery growing hourly more obscure. A wholesale roundup of known crooks within the city limits failed to uncover the pickpocket who had written the anonymous note. This failure was really of small moment, however, for even a reputable citizen's unsupported testimony that the masked halberdier with the green ribbon had plunged the knife would not have had much weight in a court of law. And all of the police investigations uncovered not a single motive, however remote, for either suspect slaying the movie star.

It was just a few hours before the release of Bonnet and LeFevre that the undertaking parlor was thrown open to the public, by order of the police, and Loring's coffined body lay in sorry state for all the curious to see. They came by the thousands—chiefly women who had long worshipped the movie star from their seats in the darkened theaters. Rich and poor, flashy and drab, sad and morbidly curious, they shuffled into that shadowy room to stare at the face whose smile had been famous even beyond the seas.

I was there, standing with "Handsome Johnny" and another detective beside the bier of the fallen idol. They were watching for a clue; I was watching for a story. And thus it was, standing there, that I saw her—the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

The richness of her clothes first attracted my attention. I cannot describe them, for I do not understand the nomenclature of feminine garb. But there was such a pronounced quality of taste and fashion in the heavy dark fur which seemed to match the living jet of

her hair, in the lustre of her black pearls, in the shimmering smartness of her dress, in the sparkle of her rings.

And then there were those warm black eyes, laguorous, passionate; and those lips, almost too full and red for an Anglo-Saxon beauty. There was certainly Latin blood in the veins of this wonder woman, and I knew that she must be a Creole.

For an instant she paused at the casket's side, looking down at the white features of Loring through narrowed eyes. Others of her sex had wept or sighed or made the sign of the cross, but not this woman. Her beautiful face seemed emotionless as she stood there, unpitying, unsympathetic. It was plain that only a morbid and idle curiosity had brought her to the place.

"Who is she?" I whispered, while the line moved on.

"Dunno," said Johnny.

So I followed her to the street, pushing through the crowd which thronged the door. There I spoke to her.

"A reporter for the *Louisianan*," she repeated, her startled expression changing to one of annoyance. "Well, I don't care to speak to a reporter for the *Louisianan*."

"Ah, I see. You were a friend, then, of Mr. Loring's?"

"No!" with considerable hauteur. "I've never seen him before in my life." Therewith she turned her shoulder to me and attempted to step into a waiting sedan. Members of the news craft will perceive that the lady was trying to "highbrow" me—and members of the craft will know what a boomerang "highbrowing" generally turns out to be. But I gave her one more chance to repent.

"Several others of the socially prominent have come to do honor to Mr. Loring, and all of them readily gave their names," I urged. "We wish to print a list of the best known citizens who are thus expressing their sorrow at a great actor's death."

"I am not interested," was the cold reply.

"No, apparently you are afraid to give your name. You seem to be ashamed of it."

The woman turned at the step of her car. Those dark eyes were alight with anger; the full lips seemed to quiver with her scorn.

"Afraid! Dolores Champreux is afraid of no one," she snapped. Then, ignoring me further, she entered her car and was gone.

CHAPTER IV

"BATIK. . . I LOVE HIM SO"

SEVERAL nights later, after an evening of tiresome routine at the office, I made my way up a certain flight of narrow stairs leading from the ancient flagstones of Dauphine Street. The stairs brought me to the exclusive establishment of Monsieur Vicq, with whom you may possibly be acquainted.

Monsieur Vicq is reputed to be a descendent of Dominique You, able lieutenant of the pirate Lafitte in those days when the Jolly Roger prospered along the bayous and shores of lower Louisiana. Some of the pirate strain still lingers in the blood of Monsieur Vicq, if one may judge by the prices he charges for brandy and absinthe; but he accompanies his piracy with such deferential hospitality and pleasing courtesy that a fellow, somehow, feels honored at being his victim.

Some eight or ten men were crowded about the bar this night, watching something with laughing interest. As I approached them, the door clicking shut behind me, a weird voice rose from their midst.

"Beware!" it cried in grotesque French. "On your guard! On your guard!"

"See, you must watch your pocketbooks, my friends," chuckled Monsieur Vicq from behind the bar. "Lafitte here thinks that Monsieur Crilly is dangerous."

Everybody turned and laughed immoderately at my expense. At the same instant a parrot, gaudy feathered and bright eyed, shot squawking from the bar and flew to the farther corner of the room. There it perched unsteadily on the hilt of an old cutlass and glared spitefully down at me. For only an instant was it quiet; then from its evil mouth poured a torrent of Gallic curses. No room was left for doubt; I was distinctly, unequivocally persona non grata with that parrot.

"You'll have to pardon Lafitte. He's drunk," explained Monsieur Vicq, pointing to a half-filled whisky glass on the bar. As though to corroborate his statement, the bird lost its balance and fluttered weakly down to a more extensive perch on a table. Then it promptly fell asleep.

Over the absinthe I learned of the parrot's arrival. That same morning it had come, flying from nowhere and alighting on the balcony outside Monsieur Vicq's sleeping quarters. "Hello," it had said in French, and straightway our host claimed the bird as his. A parrot that could speak his ancestral language appealed to Monsieur Vicq's piratical soul. He would teach the newcomer a buccaneer's chanty and greatly enhance the atmosphere of his "club" thereby.

"He's a pirate all right, my Lafitte is," said Monsieur Vicq proudly. "You should see how he took to the whisky—just like a duck to the water. It did my heart good to watch him."

"Well, is that any reason why he should call me a flock of nasty names?" I asked aggrieved. "Do I look like a prohibition agent or a director of the Anti-Saloon League? It's a wonder that you wouldn't explain to your Lafitte that I 'belong'."

"Oh, you'll be good friends in a day or two, after he's learned that you're not so bad as your face."

In time the patrons began to leave the establishment of Monsieur Vicq. His usual closing hour was near, and only four drinkers were left. Three of these sat before the open hearth, talking horses; while the other lay slumbering with his head resting on a card table. From the wall the yellowed etching of the gulf-coast buccaneer, Lafitte, looked down almost benignly upon the comfortable little haven of mine host. Even his wicked namesake, the parrot, was at peace with the world—asleep.

"Listen, Monsieur Vicq.," I asked softly, "do you know of a young queen named Champreux—a dark, luscious lady who is without doubt the most beautiful creature this side of paradise?"

"Champreux!" The old man threw me a swift glance. "Monsieur Crilly, have *you* seen Dolores Champreux? Ah, but you have. I can see it in your face."

He sighed and regarded me dolefully through his spectacles. There was such a solemn air about him, such an attitude of alarmed dismay, that I felt my heart begin to race with excited curiosity.

"Yes—sure I've seen her," I said eagerly. "You bet I've seen her. Say, I'd give—"

But Monsieur Vicq, shaking his finger under my nose, interrupting me with sudden animation:

"Forget her, my young friend. She's a bad, bad woman."

"A huh?"

"Look," whispered Monsieur Vicq, pointing beyond me to the man who slept at the table. "This is not, on your honor, for the paper, but only for yourself. That poor fellow there, do you know who he is? Eh, do you know him? That, Monsieur Crilly, is the ruins of a high-born Thibonniere—an aristocrat ever since Canal Street *was* a canal. Now look at him! No money, no health, no hope; yet not a day over thirty. And why?" Monsieur Vicq shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, he fell in love with Dolores Champreux!"

"You mean, she—she spurned him?"

'Spurned!" echoed my host, losing himself in a series of French exclamations. "Monsieur Crilly, he was not so

fortunate. Dolores Champreux *returned his love!*"

At that instant the young man raised his head and stared blankly before him. I watched, fascinated, reading in those lustreless, shrunken eyes and hollow cheeks all the tragic horror of a felon on the scaffold. What did all this mean? What was the story behind that shattered youth? Could my haughty wonder woman ever have kissed those drooping lips, have stroked that touselled hair? Could she have given herself to such a wretch as this? Could she . . .

"Do you see?" It was the soft whisper of Monsieur Vicq. "That's what it does, her love. She is—how do you say it?—a vampire."

My senses began to swim; the room seemed suddenly stuffy. There was something so weird, so uncanny about Monsieur Vicq's strange hints—with the evidence sitting here before me, blinking stupidly in unwitting confirmation of his words. The old man quickly handed me a drink.

When, a few minutes later, he locked the doors, I remained with him. There was a diary which he was going to show me—an old diary that I wanted to write about for the Sunday paper. Picking up the sleeping parrot, he led me to his own quarters in the rear.

We had been there for probably five minutes when the bird awoke. I thought that its strange animosity for me was merely a passing fancy, but it quickly showed me that I was wrong. Some instinct must have told it I was to be mistrusted.

"Ah, old fellow!" greeted Monsieur Vicq, holding out his glass to the waking parrot. "Have an eye-opener, eh?"

Without hestitation Lafitte dipped its dark beak into the liquor and drank. Then, its sluggish senses reviving, it looked about and spotted me. In an instant that bird was transformed into a maniac, shrieking French curses and fanning its wings in a tempest of blind fury. Suddenly it flew at my face. I managed to beat it off just in time, else I suppose it would have clawed out one of my eyes.

Lafitte calmed down immediately after our queer encounter and went to roost atop a tall, old fashioned bed post. But it didn't once take its sullen gaze from me; at least, every time I looked at my strange antagonist, it was boring holes right through me with its eyes.

So passed half an hour or more, while Monsieur Vicq translated portions of the ancient diary. I was rapidly losing myself in a world of long ago, a world of derringers and lurking ships and decks slippery with blood. So still was the room, so quiet the night, that I could almost hear the splash of oars as Louisiana's famous pirate put out from his lair on Bayou Barataria. Once the deep growl of a steamship whistle sounded from the Mississippi, coming like an organ accompaniment to the low murmur of Monsieur Vicq.

"See," he was saying, "here is an entry about Chevalier Raoul de Champreux, great-grandfather of the young lady who so delighted your eye."

"Yes? What does it say?" I asked eagerly, conscious of a sudden quickening of my pulse. Monsieur Vicq bent over the yellowed page.

"It says that—ah, such a ridiculous handwriting!—that the chevalier fought a duel in St. Anthony's Garden with . . . well, never mind; the name is blotted beyond recognition. The affair was over a lady—a Marie de Bois. That's all it says, Monsieur Crilly, except that the lady watched the duel from the shadow of St. Louis Cathedral and eloped with Champreux after he had killed his opponent. No wonder their descendant is such a woman—eh, Monsieur Crilly?"

Before I could make any comment there came an inarticulate muttering from that bad-tempered parrot. Then its voice rose to a high, unearthly pitch and suddenly broke into words—five words in startlingly clear, distinct English:

"Batik, I love him so!"

The bird repeated this sentence thrice, while both of us stared up in mute surprise. Then it flew down from its perch and, carefully avoiding me, alighted close beside Monsieur Vicq's absinthe glass. It immediately began to sip the milk-white liquid.

"Aha!" exclaimed the old man. "My Lafitte's a lady, and she's been driven to drink by love. There, Monsieur Crilly, is a real heart story for your paper."

CHAPTER V

THE VAMPIRE WOMAN

Now see how implacable is Destiny, moving steadily onward beneath our unseeing eyes. So insidious is it, so snake-like in its grim advance, that we do not recognize it until, striking, it comes back to mind with all the vivid focus of a lightning flash.

Monsieur Vicq's cursing, sullen-eyed parrot, for example. Think of *that* gaudy demon as an instrument of Destiny! Nothing was further from my thoughts, when I listened to its barbarous chattering, than the murder of Thomas Loring on the eve of Mardi Gras. And by the following afternoon, as I entered the Louisianan Building, the strange incident was almost entirely forgotten. In fact, I was thinking at the time of a dozen oysters to be consumed presently over the bivalve bar of Joe Posido on Poydras Street.

And then . . . . I heard a woman's tearful voice coming from the business office on the main floor.

"Oh, please put it on the first page, where everyone will see it," said the voice. "Make the type large: 'Parrot lost.' Make that part *very* large."

Parrot! I paused at the word and listened, suddenly alert. The smooth, mechanically courteous baritone of the "ad" clerk was speaking:

"You can have large type, miss, but I can't place it on page 1. It will have to go in the regular classified columns."

"But it won't be seen." The voice rose in apprehension. "It must be seen. If I don't find the parrot, my mistress says I shall be fire."

That's when I walked into the business office, beaming all over in my role of good samaritan. The fact that the tearful applicant was young and pretty, with large dark eyes and coquettish curls, made the good samaritan feel altogether like a much better samaritan.

"Pardon me," I said, "what languages does your parrot speak?"

"Languages?" Her face brightened eagerly "Oh, he swears frightful in French, just like his mistress. He knows some English, too. Please, mister, do you know where he is—our Batik?

"Our *what?*"

"Batik. Ah, you don't understand. That is his so funny name."

"Batik, Batik," I repeated it thoughtfully, pondering the strange sentence which the bird had uttered the night before. It had not occurred to me then that the creature might be called Batik, and this revelation made me instantly curious about its owner. Fancy a woman making a confidant of her parrot, telling it how much she loved some lucky, or unlucky, male! Fancy a woman calling a bird Batik!

"Why, yes," I said aloud, "I think I know where your parrot is. What's your mistress's name?"

"Miss Dolores Champreux, mister, on Burgundy Street. She will be so glad to get her Batik back. Oh, how happy that devil-bird will make her! He is"—calming down a bit in the interest of sober explanation—"you see, mister, he is her very close pet, her baby that she loves and talks to. I think he is related to the Satan himself, but Miss Dolores—ah, she adores him like a lover. Her heart broke most completely when he left her yesterday. Last night she could not sleep even a little wink for grief and worry."

"Because of *that* feathered wildcat?" The picture of Dolores, haughty, cold, standing unmoved beside the casket of Loring, flashed before my vision. "Good Lord, lady," I exclaimed, "from the

mean way your mistress looked at Tom Loring the other day, I didn't think *anything* could break her heart."

The maid's eyes opened wide and her lips parted in a sort of gasp. The eyes, I noted, had a touch of purple hidden amid the brown; and the lips were full and red and warm. Very like the wonderful Dolores was she, save that the queenly stature and cool imperiousness of the high-born Creole girl were absent. Anne—she said her other name was Durant—had all the yielding softness of a kitten, while her mistress was none less than a handsome tigress of the jungle.

But now the kitten was plainly startled.

"Tom Loring!" Anne repeated. "Miss Dolores she could not look at *him* so mean."

"Why not?"

"Because she . . . Well, just because."

"Because she what?" I demanded, feeling that electric thrill which comes with the conviction that something is about to happen. I stepped close to Anne and repeated the question.

"Because she was such a good friend of Mr. Loring's," replied the girl, drawing away a bit apprehensively.

The hunch hit me then. Out of a clear sky it came, as suddenly and unexpectedly as a shooting star. There in the despised business office—a fearful place for any self-respecting reporter to have an inspired thought—the idea flashed into my mind:

Dolores Champreux knows who murdered Loring!

Several occurrences, insignificant until this chance conversation with Anne suddenly linked them together, returned to form that instant hunch. The presence of Dolores at the undertaking rooms; her broken victim at Monsieur Vicq's, and the latter's story of a vampire's destroying love; the words of the cursing absinthe-drinking hell-bird; Dolores' denial that she had ever before seen Loring, and Anne's present admission that her mistress and the murdered movie star were "good" friends—these trivial instances now came back to mind freighted with sudden ominous meaning.

The notion left me dizzy for an instant; then my pulse began to riot with the exultation of the chase. I felt as a bloodhound must feel when, after sniffing vainly for the trail, it comes abruptly upon the man-scent. For at last I had a clue; here, when I least expected it, one had fallen at my feet and begged to be stumbled upon.

At a glance the psychological facts seem to dovetail. Dolores, the vampire woman; Dolores, the ruthless jungle creature, who ruined her lovers and taught her pet to curse and drink; Dolores, the lovely, whose lips men coveted with all the passion of the ages—such a woman as this Dolores had, possibly, been scorned by Thomas Loring. Given this hypothetical motive, the rest seemed logical. Stung to fury, the girl had induced an infatuated suitor—either LeFevre or Bonnet—to destroy her scorner. And then the thought of Dolores' rewarding arms had sustained the murderer throughout his inquisition. Yes, it was all plain as day to me now.

This was not my trend of thought at the time of course. These last few paragraphs analyze a conviction which came to me, still hazy and nebulous, in the space of a few brief seconds. I don't suppose Anne was aware of any appreciable delay before my questioning.

"A good friend!" I scoffed, repeating her words. I was thinking of the parrot's wild outcry of the night before. "What you mean is that she was a good lover. Isn't that about right? Didn't she love Loring?"

"Yes," said the girl, taken by surprise. "Yes, she seemed to be . . . oh, really, mister, I don't know if Miss Dolores loved him or not. She didn't tell me, mister. Honest, mister, I was only fooling. I don't know even a little thing about it."

But she had already given herself

away by her manner. Leading Anne out of the despised business office, away from the staring "ad" clerk's unhallowed presence, I put her through a virtual cross examination. She had to talk, because I threatened to keep the parrot if she didn't. Poor girl, she thought she had fallen into the hands of the Chief himself, judging by the terrified expression of her face.

Anne didn't contribute much in the way of helpful knowledge—not at once. She believed that Dolores had first met Loring in Los Angeles. She recalled how excited her mistress had been on a certain night shortly before Mardi Gras—a night when she was to be a dinner guest with Loring at the Laborde residence in Esplanade Avenue. "I must look more beautiful than ever before," Dolores had told her after the perfumed bath was over. "Make my hair wonderful, Anne, wonderful as night itself . . ."

And then she told of the Dolores that returned home, shortly before midnight—a mad, wild, unchained Dolores, who slapped Anne's face and called her terrible names and then burst into tears in a heap on the floor. Until after dawn she had raged, finally falling asleep from very exhaustion. But when she awoke, Anne said, Dolores was deadly calm; and this same grim calmness had continued with her right up to Mardi Gras itself.

"How did she act the night Loring was murdered?" I asked, striving hard to speak in an unconcerned, matter-of-fact manner.

"How can I know, mister? Miss Dolores gave me the afternoon and evening off, with tickets to the theatre. She said to have plenty of good time, because Lent would so soon be here."

"Well, then, on Mardi Gras—how did she act on Mardi Gras?"

"Why—why, Miss Dolores was most strange, mister. She sent for the morning paper and then she locked herself in her room with Batik—all that day. She wouldn't even let me in to do her hair. Just once did I see her, and then . . ."

"Then what?" I demanded sharply. Poor little Anne, terrified by my tone, wondering what it was all about, not quite sure whether she was stepping toward a prison cell or not, began to cry.

"N—nothing, mister. She only gave me a letter and said I should take it right to the postoffice."

"A letter! Addressed to who?"

"The—the—the Chief of police," faltered Anne in a whisper.

CHAPTER VI

"HELL HATH NO FURY . . ."

With two glasses and a bottle of absinthe sitting before me on a brass-bound sea chest, Batik and I were locked in Monsieur Vicq's sleeping room. It was nearly midnight, and the rain was pattering drearily on the casements. For an entire hour I had been trying to engage that evil-tempered parrot in conversation, yet all I could get out of it was an occasional darksome oath in French. For the most part Batik held its place on the back of a chair and regarded me in sullen, contemptuous silence. At long intervals it would descend for a moment to sip of the liquor.

But I was not altogether discouraged by the bird's reticence. A parrot's not going to be content with a mouthful of Gallic curses so long as it knows some other words. Sooner or later, I thought, Batik's tongue would loosen and it would become sociable under the absinthe's influence. Then perhaps it would repeat another phrase or two of deep significance, something even more meaningful than the "I love him so!" of the night before. Hadn't Anne told me that all through Mardi Gras Dolores was alone with Batik? What had she told her ugly pet that day? What secrets did it hold behind those wicked jet-black eyes?

For I was hopelessly puzzled by the waiting maid's disclosure about that letter. Why should Dolores have written Chief Dollar that the halberdier with the

green ribbon stabbed Loring? Why had she used St. Charles Hotel stationery and posed as a grateful pickpocket? Evidently she wanted to have LeFevre convicted of Loring's murder, at the same time concealing her identity. Did that mean, then, that Bonnet had done the slaying for her? Was she trying to divert suspicion from the guilty halberdier to the one that was innocent?

In the morning, I had promised Anne, Batik should be returned to its mistress. Meanwhile I must induce it to talk and, if possible, get some inkling of the answer of these questions.

"I love Tom so!" For the fiftieth time that evening I repeated those words; and for the fiftieth time the parrot replied with a sullen stare. "I love him so," I said again, and then: "Oh, Batik, Bonnet killed him! Bonnet killed him!"

"Sacré nom de chien!" rasped the parrot, looking directly at me as it cursed. There was no doubt about it—Monsieur Crilly was meant and no other.

"Oh, all right!" I growled. "You're another, and a damned blankety-blank to boot."

I sipped my absinthe sulkily, and Batik hopped down for another drink from its own glass. Instead of returning to its perch on the chair back, however, it flew across the room and alighted on the mantel. There it proceeded to hop ludicrously from one foot to the other.

"He's dead! He's dead! He's dead!" shrilled Batik.

I considered this statement carefully, trying to analyze its meaning and read between the lines. Here, then, was the exultant cry of a tiger woman whose dream of vengeance had been realized. She had just heard of Loring's murder. Consequently, she was excited and happy and . . .

"They'll never know," shouted Batik, still dancing tipsily on the mantel. "He's dead! Batik, I love him so! *Sacre nom de chien!* They'll never know. He's dead! They'll never know. Batik, I love him so!"

The parrot continued this medley for several minutes, garnishing it at times with a fresh oath, but not a single new expression did it utter. At last, overcome by the liquor, it fell into a sound sleep, just as it had done the night before.

I sat there motionless, listening to the patter of the rain and thinking. They'll never know, eh? I smiled with smug satisfaction. Never know that Dolores Champreux had instigated a cowardly murder, eh? Never know that the idol of millions would still be living if it weren't for her jealous rage and smouldering fury.

My smile broadened. Soon *everybody* would know; yes, just as soon as I could gather enough evidence to make my case complete. I thrilled at the thought of bringing that beautiful creature to justice; for, to be perfectly frank, I resented the contemptuous, disdainful manner in which she had spoken to me. Moreover, the woman's combination of charming loveliness and diabolical cold-bloodedness made my own blood turn cold at thought of her. She must certainly be inhuman; like her strange parrot, she was a devil incarnate.

"The next thing to do is find out her relations with Bonnet and LeFevre—especially Bonnet," I said, talking aloud to myself. "Hm! Might buzz Thibonniere, the love ruin, too. He used to belong to that swell society set. Might tell me a lot."

The more I considered this last suggestion, the better I thought of it. Thibonniere ought to be easy. Treat him just like the parrot. Feed him booze until his tongue is swimming. Steer the conversation in the direction of Dolores and Bonnet and the rest; then listen to the record play.

I unlocked the door leading to Monsieur Vicq's "club" room. As usual, there was Thibonniere, sitting at a table, staring solemnly at an empty glass. I

old-manned him and glad-handed him and hustled him back to the chamber where lay the brass-bound sea chest. I poured him a drink and told him how I had instantly picked him out as the one blue-blooded gentleman in the room. Then, having pitched the conversation to a high social plane, as it were, I hauled in Bonnet, LeFevre and the murder of Loring.

Thibonniere warmed rapidly to my fellowship. Poor devil, he hadn't found the world very cordial since returning, a derelict, to the city of his birth. His own set either avoided him or didn't know he was back; and by the submerged stratum of society he was regarded as a "queer sort of guy." He was really very grateful for my friendly companionship that night.

"My dear sir, I myself was once a prominent member of the Krewe of Proteus," he said after a time. "The last pageant I participated in was four years ago." He considered this fact with a horrible twist that was meant for a smile. "Four—years—ago. I was engaged to—er—to a very beautiful young lady then—wonderfully beautiful, that is, to look at."

The dissipated, wasted figure actually shuddered with the horror of the recollection. Rather panicky was the haste with which he seized his glass and drained it.

"I knew LeFevre well—very well, indeed."

"You did?"

"Ah, yes. It was the night of the Proteus Ball, four years ago, that my fiancée—my beautiful, divine-looking sweetheart—recognized LeFevre, despite his mask, and made the advances of—"

Thibonniere halted and stared at me almost sternly through his bleary eyes. For a long moment he regarded me. Then, leaning suddenly forward and tapping my knee, he said.

"I don't know why I shouldn't talk about this, my friend. You don't know me, nor do you know the lady I refer to. Frankly, sir, she made the advances of a courtesan to LeFevre at the Proteus Ball that night—yes, my fiancée, the most beautiful, most ravishing woman in all New Orleans, the most desired of the Southland's daughters, offered herself to my friend on that romantic carnival night! And honest LeFevre, the soul of honor and decency, thought the matter out very carefully, after promptly declining her offer, and decided I should know. He came to my home early on the morning of Mardi Gras, when I was in bed. I . . ."

The derelict emptied his glass again, setting it down with a nervous, jerky movement. He shook his head and shoulders, as though to get rid of a disagreeable presence. His manner grew more formal and distant, suddenly losing that air of confidential sociability.

"I tell you this, sir, merely because you mentioned LeFevre and the strange murder for which he was arrested. I wanted you to see that my friend LeFevre could not stab a man to death like that. LeFevre would challenge him to a duel, maybe; but murder—never! LeFevre, sir, is too honorable."

"Bonnet? How about Bonnet?" I whispered, my temples pounding with excitement. Thibonniere shrugged his shoulders and, after a questioning gesture toward the bottle, poured himself a drink.

"My acquaintance with Bonnet was slight," he said, "but he seemed, to all appearance, a gentleman. Gentlemen, sir, do not murder their fellow men."

Thibonniere lost his reminiscent loquacity completely after that. The portal to the past was closed, and all my delicate hinting failed to unlock it. Of the denouement to his love affair my companion chose to say nothing. I could only conjecture the stormy scene, the contemptuous laugh of that beautiful fiend, the abrupt descent of a crushed and disillusioned lover.

But something vital and important

had come of the man's recital, fragmentary though it was. I knew now why Dolores, hating LeFevre as she must, had written that anonymous letter to the Chief. Hers had been a double purpose, as diabolical as it was cunning. Not only had she sought to shield the murderer, René Bonnet, but in the shielding to also reap the vengeance of a woman scorned.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE SHADOWS

Two nights later I was discouraged enough to become a second Thibonniere and lose myself in drink. For the best part of forty-eight hours I had sought in vain for some tangible evidence of Bonnet's guilt. From the Vieux Carré to upper St. Charles Avenue, from the demimonde of Storyville to the office buildings of Camp and Carondelet Streets I made my patient pilgrimage, questioning and cajoling and even threatening in the quest for facts to corroborate my theory of the murder. Yet all I could find tended in just the opposite direction—to prove Bonnet's innocence.

His record of conduct was flawless, from all I could learn. He was an earnest, quiet sort, not at all of the bon vivant type that is always participating in "little parties." He had never met Loring, nor did he have any cause to like or dislike him. He was engaged to marry a Shreveport girl, with whom it seemed manifest he was very much in love. Moreover, as though to discount forever my idea that he had slain Loring because of infatuation for Dolores, I learned from three separate sources that Bonnet had remarked how completely repulsive she was to him. Where, then, was a motive for the crime?

Leaning against a venerable wall of the Old Absinthe House in Bourbon Street, I considered my task a hopeless failure. I felt almost persuaded to forget the entire business—murder, Dolores, Mardi Gras and all—and pull out for Denver or the Coast. I'd been in New Orleans about long enough, anyway. Time to try a new town and a fresh paper and a change of atmosphere.

That's just about the way I saw things then. But meanwhile there was an appointment to keep with Anne, who would be off duty tonight and had arranged to meet me at the corner of Bourbon and Bienville Streets. I'd promised to take her to a movie and then to a dance, meaning to question her artfully throughout the evening about her mysterious mistress. I told myself that it was strictly business and would go down as such on the *Louisianan's* expense account, but . . . but Anne was a mighty pretty girl.

She looked especially so this evening. Those coquettish curls glinted softly under the yellow street lamps. The dark eyes, touched with purple, seemed to be forever dancing and sparkling and peering saucily up at mine as we walked along. It was evident that Anne had become rather fond of me—a phenomenon which I accounted for by two facts: her job gave her little chance to get acquainted with young folks, and a reporter is regarded by girls of her class as a person of some magnificence. Otherwise I guess I wouldn't have had a chance.

It was after 11:30 when we left the bright lights of Canal Street for the homeward stroll. Shadows haunted the narrow thoroughfares of the Vieux Carré, clinging to balconies and shuttered windows like lurking demons of the night. A dinky street car passed with a rattling, coughing groan. The dark figure of a woman scurried past a street lamp and disappeared into the gloom of a silent, sinister doorway. The sound of a guitar, bearing on its faint strains the magic of mystery and romance, came to us with the staccato laugh of an unseen man. Anne drew closer to me and shuddered.

"You've gotten me all frightened,"

she said. "I'm almost afraid to go home and—and stay in that house with a—a murderer. Ugh!" She gripped my arm and looked up at me, her breath warm upon my face. "Do you really think she did that—killed that man?"

"Yes, girlie, I feel just as certain as—as certain as you're prettier than Norma Talmadge that Dolores Champreux is responsible for Loring's murder. But how to prove it is the biggest puzzle that was ever invented. I swear I believe she hypnotized that Bonnet fellow and made him do it without even knowing it."

"Oh-h-h!"

"But if you meant it when you said you'd do anything in the world for me—if you weren't kidding, why you may help me do the impossible and convict a terrible woman."

"Oh, I *did* mean it. I *will* help you," murmured Anne, snuggling her head in a proprietary way against my shoulder.

It all looks foolish and sirupy when put in cold black and white on a printed page, but we were two very serious, important persons who walked through the Vieux Carré that night amid the whispers and shadows and romance-scented air of a New Orleans evening in February. The world just then was a place of glorious adventure, where one might any moment hear a rattling chain and the throaty chant of the fifteen men on a dead man's chest. If we'd been sailing straight for the Spanish main, with gold in the hold and a prow dipping deep, I couldn't have been more excited. That's what a murder quest and Dauphine Street and a Southern night and a pretty girl can do to a very susceptible young man.

Anne unlocked the door softly when we came to the old homestead, now occupied by the last of the Champreux name.

"She's at the lake tonight," whispered my companion for the third time that evening. "Champagne and dancing on the Mordant yacht, and other things she shouldn't do in Lent. I'll lead you right to the closet."

This closet was an important detail that had just occurred to Anne a minute or so before, as we were approaching the house. It opened into Dolores' sleeping chamber, but ever since Mardi Gras its door had been locked. Never before had Anne known this door to be locked; yet Dolores had flown into a rage because Anne tried to open it with the innocent intention of putting away a hat box. Dolores had even threatened to slap her if she ever went near that closet door again. It was all very astounding to poor Anne.

We entered the hallway, where a glass-spangled chandelier glittered dully in the glare of the gaslight. Then, still walking on tip-toe, although the steps were heavily carpeted, we started up the staircase. Past gloomy portraits, large and heavily framed—portraits of the Champreux ancestors, who had duelled and duded and made desperate love in days of long ago—past them we crept to the second floor. A whispered consultation, while hearts beat nervously in the weird silence of that hall. Then Anne pushed open a door and stepped into the darkness of Dolores' bedroom. She groped for the light.

I began to follow—was just on the threshold, in fact—when a terrible guttural cry shot out from the blackness of that chamber.

"Beware! On your guard!" screamed a voice in French—the unmistable warning of that devil-bird, Batik.

"*Sacre dieu,* who is there?" came a low, tense contralto. "Don't move now! I have a gun."

"It's only me—Anne. Don't shoot, Miss Dolores. It's only me—just me."

At the first shriek from the parrot I had instinctively stepped back from the threshold. Now, hearing the even more unexpected voice of Anne's mistress, I crouched low and slipped swiftly down the stairs. Even as I crept past those family portraits once again, bent on getting away before all our plans were

spoiled, I heard the sharp crack of Dolores' hand on Anne's pretty, dimpled cheek. Then that tiger woman's scream of fury, which I shall never forget:

"Sneaking, eh?" Here a dripping oath in unpolished French. "Sneak again about this room and I'll kill you —yes, *kill* you! I'll run a knife through your sneaking little heart, you . . ."

Another oath, which was echoed in the high, unearthly voice of Batik. For perhaps a minute the tirade continued. Then, as though its mistress had given it a signal, the bird subsided as abruptly as it had started, and I heard only the terrified sobs of poor little Anne.

But the storm was over. With a curt command she was dismissed for the night; and I, reassured, pulled the front door gently shut and disappeared into the shadows.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE SIGN OF MERCURY

Before morning a heavy rain began to fall. It fell in a steady downpour, almost tropical in its first intensity. By ten o'clock, when I started out to get my breakfast, the ground was sodden and the gutters were rivers of dirty water. New Orleans, crouching behind its levee banks below the flood level of the Mississippi, is a saturated city at best—but when a storm comes along the old town holds its breath, postpones its curses and swims for life.

As I was cutting across Lafayette Square, head down to escape the rain, I all but collided with a woman. Begging her pardon, I stepped aside and she passed hastily on. Then, just as I started to resume my own hurried stride, the imprint made by her shoe caught my eye. It was a clean, perfect outline; but what instantly focussed my attention was a small impress in the turf of Mercury's winged foot—the trade mark of a well-known brand of rubber heel.

In a moment the design dissolved and the shoe's outline grew dim, as the rain began its work of erasure. A rod or so beyond, the woman's footprints were almost entirely obliterated by the downpour. But no matter! They had done their little bit in the big scheme of Destiny. They had given me my idea.

It was a desperate idea, the idea of a drowning man who has clutched at every other piece of wreckage in sight and has only one spar left to cling to. As I ate breakfast I elaborated upon my plan, and the more I pondered it the greater grew my enthusiasm. It would either make me locally famous or set me up as a laughing stock, and in the latter case there were still numerous trains leaving town each day. I'd take a chance.

Entering the Louisianan Building, I met Dickie Flower, who has the Federal beat.

"Pretty soft!" he grinned. "How much longer do you think you can get away with that stall?"

"Huh? What do you mean, stall?"

"What do I mean! Why, solving the Loring murder, mister, when you might be doing honest newspaper work and relieving the burdens of us overworked contemporaries. What do you do with all your spare time—go to the movies?"

Upstairs I found the city editor was getting much the same notion.

"Ah, here's Mr. Crilly, our eminent sleuth," he greeted, while several of the fellows began to snicker. "Are you prepared to tell the public tomorrow morning who plunged the nasty knife into Thomas Loring?"

"No, but I know who did it."

I spoke in my best pulpit style—seriously, earnestly, as befits a man who is trying to convince a bunch of infidels. The fellows looked at me, startled. The boss quickly scanned my face, saw I wasn't joking, and caught his breath.

"Who?" he demanded in a low voice.

"A woman. I'll tell you her name later."

For I had finally reached the conclusion that Dolores Champreux was her-

self the murderer of Loring. That seemed the only remaining solution. Certainly I'd seen and heard enough to feel sure she was in some way responsible. Certainly I had sufficient proof that neither LeFevre nor Bonnet was the assassin. That, then, left only Dolores—Dolores, who had screamed out a threat last night to run a knife through Anne's fluttering heart. Such a cold-blooded deed seemed to fit in exactly with the character of this lovely demon. From the fragments of her life story, picked up here and there since that day at the undertaking parlor, I knew she would not hesitate an instant to murder a man if she hated him sufficiently.

But how had it been done? Granting the premise that Dolores was Tom Loring's slayer, there was only one way out. *Three* halberdiers must have been in the building the night of the Proteus Ball, and one of them was a woman!

This conviction had been growing on me ever since Batik's unearthly scream ended our advance upon the mysterious closet. Reconstructing the crime, everything seemed simple once Dolores had somehow learned what costumes were to be worn by Bonnet and LeFevre. Wearing a duplicate of this halberdier garb concealed beneath a long cloak, I pictured her entering the building and going into hiding — possibly in some dark basement storeroom.

There she had waited, listening to the faint strains of the orchestra, the shuffling of countless feet, the sounds of carnival revelry in the hall above her. Then, throwing off her cloak and donning the ludicrous mask, Dolores had slipped upstairs and mingled with the carefree throng of maskers and their guests. She had found Loring—stabbed him—dashed away while everyone was paralyzed with horror — resumed her charming femininity with her cloak. In the confusion, with dozens of other frightened women leaving the hall of tragedy, it was easy for her to walk out and enter a cab, even while the police were arresting Bonnet and LeFevre.

This was the story which I proposed to write for the paper—a fictionized version of Thomas Loring's murder, to be run as a full-page Sunday feature. It was a nervy thing to suggest, when you consider that I was on the staff of the *Louisianan*. Think of that venerable journal's dignity and good name—especially its dignity! Think of it taking a leaf from the yellow press and actually printing a blood-and-thunder story based on New Orleans' most sensational murder! Then think, if you can, of the President of the United States down on his knees in the White House garage shooting craps with the colored help!

But the managing editor succumbed nevertheless. He flatly refused at first, weakening only when I told him that otherwise the killing of Thomas Loring would never be solved. My threat to quit the *Louisianan* and go over to the *Item*, taking the woman's name with me, finally settled him.

"But, mind you," he grumbled, "if all this katzenjammer doesn't clean up that murder, as you promise, you start looking for a job at once."

"Sure," I grinned, wondering how much the fare would be to Denver. Then I locked myself up in a room with a typewriter and for two days labored on my story. It was a work of art, according to its author. Dolores —called Celeste in the fictionized version—was described just accurately enough to make her see an uncomfortable resemblance. The parrot was brought in very casually, so as not to reveal Dolores' identity to friends who might read this Sunday feature. The plot itself followed the general outline given above.

The movie star was slain, with unrequited love as the motive; the murderess had escaped; the detectives were questioning two masked halberdiers. And at that point, about two-thirds through the story, I wrote this paragraph:

But the fair assassin had overlooked one point, one little fact that thwarted her entire scheme. She did not know that a crumbled section of the storeroom floor had been repaired that very morning and that the impress of her heel, bearing the design of Mercury's winged foot, was stamped in the soft cement as evidence of her guilt. She did not. . . .

CHAPTER IX

INTO THE GULF

SUNDAY morning the streets of the Vieux Carré were silent, empty save for a few devout souls hurrying to the Cathedral for early mass. As I ascended the steps of the Champreux home, the door opened for me and quickly shut again.

"Hello," whispered Anne, squeezing my hand. "She's sound asleep."

"Paper been delivered yet?"

"Uh-huh. Here it is."

I took the *Louisianan* and turned its pages. Yes, there was the story, spread out opposite the society section, where she would be sure to see it. Rather than illustrate it with the picture of a masked halberdier stabbing a man in the midst of a bizarre ballroom scene, the *Louisianan* had made peace offerings to its outraged dignity by reproducing a photograph of the Proteus pageant passing the St. Charles Hotel!

The other Champreux servants had gone to mass; so it was with confidence that Anne conducted me to the kitchen and then up a rear stairway to the second floor. The old slave quarters led off from this stairway, stretching back as a sort of detached annex to the house. On the other side of the building, farthest from the slave quarters, was a garden. A high brick fence separated it from the world beyond.

Anne halted at the head of the stairs for a final word.

"Now, Miss Dolores will read the paper in bed—she always does," said Anne. "As soon as she calls for it, I'll raise the shade to let in the light. You can stay hidden behind the plants in the window box and yet see everything she does. Now . . . be oh, so quiet, won't you?"

We passed down the second hall on tip-toe, scarcely breathing for fear of alarming that devil-bird Batik. Anne pushed a door and ushered me into a lavishly-furnished guest room. The wise little girl, remembering that opening a casement is usually accompanied by creaks and knocks, had done the job the night before. All I had to do was climb over the sill to the balcony and creep cautiously back toward Dolores' window.

"Careful, dear," whispered Anne, and the purple in her brown eyes seemed to take on softer lustre. She watched me crawl the nine or ten feet to the window, and then her pretty head disappeared. A few minutes later I heard her singing softly in one of the rooms below.

For at least an hour I lay there on the balcony overlooking the garden. I was too excited to admire those trees and plants or enjoy the songs of the birds. A dozen conjectures kept recurring in my mind. What if Dolores should take a notion to enjoy the morning sunshine from the balcony? What was I to do if that devil-bird, hopping about the room, should discover me and make an outcry. What if . . .

I heard the click of a knob being turned—then the sound of voices. I held my breath and crouched low as the shade was suddenly raised. For a fleeting second I had a glimpse of Anne's face behind the window.

"Good morning, Batik," she was saying. "How are you this morning, eh?"

Then a guttural clucking, followed by some words which I could not distinguish. Evidently Batik's voice was a bit rusty after its night of disuse.

Now I cautiously raised my head and peered through the leaves of something that resembled a cypress plant. The sunlight was pouring into the bed chamber, brightening it from corner to ceiling and filling the wall with dancing sunbeams. Propped up by a bank of pillows in a great four-poster bed, with

elaborate canopy overhead and curtains drawn gracefully back, I could just see the dark head and white shoulders of Dolores Champreux. Anne was standing beside the bed, holding a tray with two cordial glasses, one of which her mistress had just emptied. Perched on the edge of the tray, and quaffing of the other, was Batik.

"The paper," snapped Dolores a minute later.

Anne handed the *Louisianan* to her and retired. There was a bright flash of wings in the sunlight as the parrot flew to one of the bed posts. For a few seconds it muttered things to itself. Then the room became quiet except for the crackling of pages being turned . . .

I knew the instant Dolores had come upon my story. There was a sudden movement of the paper, a low exclamation. Then she sat straight up, holding the page before her, with wide, startled eyes. The sunshine gleamed on her shoulders and glistened in her dark hair. The smooth whiteness of her throat was a song in itself. Crouching there on the balcony, I felt a strange sinking feeling that left me depressed and unhappy. Could anything so beautiful, so exquisitely made as this Creole girl, be a cold-hearted murderess? For a moment I was sorry I had ever tried to solve the mystery of Loring's death.

"Sacre!" The oath sounded like the hiss of a snake. *"Mon dieu,* a parrot, too! My Batik!"

The muttered exclamations, most of them undistinguishable from where I lay, continued as she read on. Then, evidently, she came to the part about the impress of a heel in the soft cement. With the flash of an arm the paper fell to the floor. In an instant she was out of bed, a vision of animated lingerie. From her neck she slipped a chain, passing it over her head and then down through the mass of heavy hair which hung clear to her knees. For a moment I was puzzled. Then I saw, with a thrill of triumphant joy, that a key was fastened to the chain.

No longer did I crouch behind the plant. In my excitement I sat bolt upright, my head half way through the window. No harm done, though, for Dolores was too frantically preoccupied to see anything but that closet door. She was inserting the key now. She was turning it. The door was flung open and she was down on her knees at the threshold. Now she was picking up a shoe—a smart, kid shoe with Cuban heels. She was turning it over. Ah, *she was examining the heel!*

But at that instant I lost interest in shoes, for my eager eyes caught sight of something else. There it was, hanging from a hook just beyond the lovely bowed head of Dolores Champreux. There it was, spangled corroborator of my theory, fairly shrieking the hangman's summons — the purple costume of a halberdier!

Batik spotted me as I started to climb over the window plants. At once its shrill scream of warning rang through the room:

"Beware! On your guard!"

"Oh!" cried Dolores, jumping to her feet, the slipper still in her hand. We stood confronting each other, speechless. Her eyes were wide with fear, narrow with hate, alight with seductive greeting—all in the space of ten kaleidoscopic seconds. Then, before I had a chance to say a word, she extended her arms to me and, smiling, spoke in her soft rich contralto.

"Ah, I remember you, my good friend. You are with the paper, the *Louisianan.*" She took a quick, graceful step forward. Her voice, if possible, became even softer, more caressing. "But what is news, my dear, compared to—love?"

It was Satan once again standing on the hilltop pointing out the riches that were his to give. Moreover, it was the most dangerous, ensnaring of all possible Satans—a beautiful, lovely woman —and the tempted one was no strong son of righteousness to utter the "Get thou behind me!" of the moral victor.

Everything faded before that exquisite vision. Judgment failed. Thibonniere, whom her love had ruined, was forgotten. So was Loring, whom her love had killed. So was the knowledge that Dolores cared no more for me than for a wharf rat, that she was merely making a shrewd cold-blooded bargain for her freedom.

But the next instant I was saved. The door opened unceremoniously and in walked Anne. There was a grim look of battle in her eyes. Fire flashed dangerously in their depths as she stepped straight to my side and faced her mistress.

"Courtesan!" she spat, her voice tense with loathing.

The change in Dolores was instantaneous. Eyes that were soft with seduction grew cruel and cold. Her warm lips curled into a snarl of utter hatred. Her complexion seemed actually to grow darker. She was a horrible, mad virago who, less than a minute before, had been a beauty of surpassing loveliness.

Suddenly from a nearby taboret Dolores snatched a long, sharp knife. The light of a demon was in her eyes, the words of a demi-mondaine on her lips. Simultaneously with her action Batik flew from the bed post and dashed screaming at my face.

"Look out!" cried Anne, jerking my arm.

I jumped to the right just in time. The knife missed my heart and ripped through the muscles of my arm, an inch below the shoulder.

Then the blade flashed again in the sunlight, and Dolores dropped to the floor. For a long moment I stared at her, while the room seemed to reel around and around about the huddled form of that lovely, demoniacal woman.

I began to grow weak. Anne was supporting me, speaking words I could not understand. Then I became conscious of something vaguely familiar ringing in my ears—something I had somewhere heard before. I made a great effort to pull myself together and concentrate on those sounds. Funny, but they seemed to be coming from the ceiling, over there in the corner. Funny . . . .

And then, quite suddenly, my senses revived and I recognized the words. They were uttered by Batik, the devil-bird, now deserted by its mistress and left miserable and alone.

"Sacre nom de chien!" it was shrieking in wild despair. "Batik, I love him so! He's dead! They'll never know! *Sacre nom de chien!"*

Then, while Anne and I looked on with speechless wonder, it dashed its evil head against the wall, again and again in blind, infuriated rushes, and fell dying beside the body of its mistress.

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THE fog came up and in from the sea, white out of the dark, rolled over the brows of black cliffs by a black wind. It spread across the black barrens and crawled up among the stunted black timber of the hills. It was cold as the breath of an iceberg.

Dunton halted instantly when the fog reached him, lowered his burden of freshly killed caribou meat to the ground, dropped his cased rifle, and felt about beneath the encircling spruce-tuck with his hands for dry moss and twigs. He lit a bunch of moss with a match from a water-tight metal box. He fed the small flame with more moss and dry twigs gathered hurriedly from the ground. The flame stood a foot high. He cleared his belt-axe then, waded into the tough brush, felt around for dry branches and hacked them off. He built the fire long and high so that it melted a cheery room for itself between painted curtains of fog and tossed golden sparks high and wide.

Philip Dunton's cabin was in a cleft in the hills not more than ten or twelve miles away to the west and north, but Dunton had no intention of attempting to reach it while the fog held. He knew the country, its physical and climatic characteristics, its permament and changing peculiarities, too well for that. The month was October, a difficult season for humans in the empty wastes of Labrador between the empty Atlantic and the desolate mountains. The only sane thing to do was to sit tight, as comfortably as possible, and wait for the fog to lift.

A small hummock, a jumble of rocks and brush, sheltered the fire from the fog-choked wind out of the east.

Dunton found a mossy basin of clear water among the rocks and there filled his smoky kettle. He gathered more of the branchy fuel—a stack of it. He found and cut a few small birches to give heart to the fire. He broiled a generous steak of venison above raked-out embers on a forked stick, ate it, brewed and drank tea, lit his pipe. He made a couch of dead brakes where the heat was reflected from the nearest face of rock, and there reclined at ease with his feet to the fire and his shoulders to the warm stone.

He was tired, for he had been on the barrens all day. He smoked out his pipe, laid it aside, and tossed more brush on the fire without leaving his couch of brakes. The fog continued to drift over and around his firelit nook, shutting him in from the world of desolation beyond. He felt as absolutely alone as he actually believed himself to be, cut off from sight and knowledge of mankind. He heard the weird cries of birds flying south high above the fog. He heard a timber-wolf howl off to the

northward, the desolate sound muted by the fog. His thoughts ranged far beyond the little ring of warmth and fire-shine, east and south beyond the empty barrens and the far black cliffs.

Philip Dunton had known three years of this desolation of loneliness, and still his heart ached with it. He remembered things of another life, as far removed from this loneliness as the life of another world.

He grew drowsy. The warmth and glow of the fire weighed his eyes. He dozed and dreamed. He was among men again. The eyes of hundreds of men who knew him, whom he knew, looked at him. He saw affection in their eyes, and admiration here and there. His friends called him by names he had not heard for three years. They thinned to shadows and turned their eyes away from him. They moved past him, shadows marching in fours—sections, platoons, companies—passing him without looking at him. He cried out to them, but not a head turned. . . . He was with a woman. She was one whom he knew and loved and had loved always. They stood in sunshine, side by side, and she looked up at him with love in her eyes. A misty rain came up and she stood apart from him. She turned her eyes away from him. He put out his hand but could not reach her. He spoke her name, but she did not heed his voice. . . . He heard someone crying. He heard a voice shouting from the dark. He stumbled over muddy ground. He became entangled in rusty wire. Again he heard the shout from the dark, a cry for help. He struggled violently to the wire—and awoke.

For a minute or two Dunton lay motionless, wide-eyed and sick of heart, his soul still back with his dreams, his physical senses alert and questioning the surrounding fog and silence. And then he heard the voice again—the shout that had pierced his sleep. He sat up and threw more fuel on the fire so that the flames leaped and sparks flew high into the cold fog. He drew his rifle from its case and slipped a clip of five cartridges into the magazine. He fired one shot into the fog, high to the west.

A human figure stumbled out of the fog into the circumscribed shine of the fire. It was a large man, empty-handed, hatless. He stood swaying, staring wild-eyed through the yellow warmth at Dunton. He was a stranger to Dunton.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Dunton. "What's the trouble?"

"I was lost!" cried the stranger, with a sob in his voice. "Lost in the fog—out there! My God!"

He staggered around an end of the fire and sank to the moss close beside Dunton. He was not of that country—neither a Livier (white settler) from Dog-sledge Cove, an Eskimo from the mouth of the river, nor a Mountaineer Indian from the highlands to the westward. He was a man from the great outer civilization—a sportsman or an explorer.

Dunton reached for the kettle, filled a mug with the bitter tea and passed it to the stranger. It was emptied in a second. The big fellow was trembling, shivering. Dutton drew a flask from his hip and poured a little rum into the mug. The rum went in a twinkling.

"That's better," said the stranger.

"You were a fool to try to travel in this fog," said Dunton.

The stranger's glance steadied on him for an instant with a look of surprise and displeasure—but only for an instant.

"My guides cleared out days ago," he said. "We waited four days in camp—until this morning—thinking the dirty blighters might come back. But they didn't, and provisions got low. Had to move, or starve. Any food?"

"I have fresh meat here, and other grub a few miles away," replied Dunton.

He cut a steak and broiled it, while the stranger sat and looked on in silence. He laid the hot steak on a smooth flake of rock. The other produced a pocket-

"You take the revolver . . . I don't trust my husband"

knife, and with that and his fingers and strong jaws he made short work of the steak.

"Where's your dunnage? Your kit?" asked Dunton.

"Out there somewhere. Dropped it when I saw your light."

"Were you alone? You spoke of 'we' a moment ago."

"My wife. Guides deserted us and took the canoe. We left the river and tried a short-cut for the coast—place called Dog-sledge Cove. Have you anything to smoke?"

"But your wife? Where is she?"

"She isn't far away. She said she turned her ankle."

"Great Heavens! Out there!—and you stuffing yourself here!"

"My dear man, she's perfectly safe. She isn't starving and she won't freeze. She could have come on with me if she'd wanted to."

"But her ankle?"

"That ankle! You don't know it as I do or you wouldn't worry."

Dunton eyed the stranger curiously.

"Queer, but I thought I heard a woman crying before your shouts woke me," he said.

"Impossible," returned the other. "She may be crying with temper, but you couldn't possibly hear her at the distance."

"Of course not. Do you want another pot of tea and another steak before we go out and look for your wife?" asked Dunton; and the wavering of the firelight gave an unpleasant twist to his lips.

"Thanks, but I think we should get

her now, don't you? The fog is a bit chilly," replied the stranger.

"You big rotter," said Dunton calmly, getting to his feet and tossing brush on the fire.

"What's that?" queried the other.

Dunton picked up his rifle.

"Push along," he said. "Lead the way."

The stranger advanced into the fog, and Dunton followed close on his heels. Their eyes were useless. Nothing was to be seen but the obscure yellow glow of the fire behind them, seemingly miles away. The ground was rough, snarled with spruce-tuck, boggy here and rocky there.

"Give her a shout," said Dunton.

"Hello! Hello!" shouted the stranger.

They stood still to listen but heard nothing. Again they moved. Again the big sportsman halted and shouted, again without success.

"That's the sort of temper she's in," he said. "She hears me, of course—but that's the way she feels."

Then Dunton shouted at the top of his voice.

"There! I heard her," he whispered.

He advanced a dozen paces, halted and shouted again. Again he caught a faint answer.

"Wait for me!" cried the other behind him.

"You stand where you are. Can you see the fire from there?" returned Dunton.

"Yes, I can just make it out."

"Then don't move until I get back."

A minute later, Dunton found the woman. Groping toward her voice, he touched her with his hands.

"I have a fire over here," he said, gently.

She did not answer.

"If your ankle is out of commission, I'll carry you," he continued.

Still without speaking, with his assistance, she stood up. So dense was the cold fog that neither could see anything of the other. He lifted her in his arms. She was not heavy and he was very strong. He held her securely and shouted, and the stranger's voice answered, flat in the muffling fog. He moved cautiously toward the sound. The woman lay close in his arms. He could not see, but he felt her face against his shoulder.

"Have you found her?" asked the voice from the blindness close in front.

"Yes; I'm carrying her," answered Dunton, shortly.

"Want any help?"

"No. You go ahead and build up the fire."

Dunton placed his feet with care, feeling for every step, for the ground was tricky as well as invisible.

"Please take a grip on me," he said.

The invisible woman slid an arm around his neck. Potent things stirred in his brain and heart—keen and bitter thoughts and fragments of romantic memories. For a moment he forgot his groping feet, tripped, and just saved himself from falling heavily forward by sinking to one knee. In the effort to maintain his equilibrium, his arms tightened convulsively on the slender body he carried.

"Sorry! Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. He felt it on his shoulder.

He saw the veiled glow of the fire expand and brighten. He was within a few yards of it when she spoke for the first time. The muffled, inarticulate cries she had made in answer to his shouts had not been speech.

"Be careful," she whispered.

He halted abruptly in his cautious advance, swayed for a moment, made one more step, and then stood firm.

"What?" he said, in a dazed voice.

"Be careful, please! Be warned!"

For a few seconds he remained thus, silent and motionless.

"Are you there?" cried the big sportsman from the circle of light and warmth close in front.

Dunton moved forward again, carried the woman around the fire, and laid her gently down on the couch of

brakes which he had gathered for himself before his solitude had been disturbed by these strangers. As she unclasped her arm from his neck, he looked down at her face. Her eyes were closed.

Dunton found the tin mug, poured a little rum into it, and gave it to the man.

"Get her to drink this," he said. "I'll make fresh tea and broil some steak."

He refilled the smoky kettle, cut several small slices of the red meat, and busied himself at the fire. The stranger came to him with the empty mug.

"She drank it," he said. "And I could do with another nip myself."

"Sorry, but you can't have it," answered Dunton, without glancing up from the business in hand. "Rum's hard to get in this country. I doubt if there's another bottle of it nearer than Dog-sledge Cove."

"We'll stock up later at the Cove, then. Come across with it! You'll be well paid for it, never fear. I am Norman Wilardson, a rich man—and generous."

Dunton went on with his crude cooking, without so much as a word or a glance by way of reply.

"Do you hear me?" cried Wilardson.

"Go to the devil!" said Dunton, still with his glance on the job in hand.

"What's that you say?"

"Not so loud! I can hear you distinctly. Go to the devil is what I said."

"Now see here, my man, that is not the way to speak to me."

Dunton withdrew the meat from the waver of heat above the red embers, placed it carefully on a knob of rock, stood up slowly and faced Mr. Wilardson.

"Start right and save yourself unpleasantness, if not worse," he said, in a low tone. "Get a correct idea of me into your head now, and so avoid trouble. I care nothing for your wealth and as little for yourself. This is my fire, and I did not invite you to it. I shall do everything in my power to help you to get out of this country, but in my own way, which is sure to be a better way than yours. I don't like what little I have seen of you—a coward, a glutton and a bully. Don't try to bully me, or you'll wish you'd not seen my fire through the fog. Your guides ran away from you—but I'm neither a Mountaineer Indian nor a half-breed, nor yet a poor Livier from the coast. Keep this in mind, will you?"

"Who are you?"

"Call me—well, call me Johnson."

"Why Johnson?"

"Because it isn't my name."

CHAPTER II

TWO MEN AND A WOMAN

THE sun rose clear next morning. The fog was gone from the vast barrens and hung scattered in white shreds along the higher mountains. The wind had fallen before dawn and there was frost in the still air. The ponds among the hummocks and the little, clear pools had ice around their edges.

Mrs. Wilardson's ankle was badly swollen. She had already cut the high boot from it. She ate a little broiled venison and drank a little tea. She glanced covertly at Dunton several times, but he did not look once at her. Wilardson did all the talking, which wasn't much. His manner was improved. He expressed regret for the sprained ankle and was polite to Dunton.

After breakfast, Dunton and Wilardson went out in search of such articles of dunnage as had been carried from the river and discarded on the barrens. Where Dunton had found the woman last night, they came upon a roll of blankets and a rifle in a case.

"Anything else?" asked Dunton.

"My wife was carrying a few things, but she dropped them quite a while before we saw your fire—when she first turned her ankle, in fact."

"And you carried her this far?"

"No, she walked. I didn't believe she was really hurt."

Dunton said nothing to that. They returned to the fire with the blankets and rifle. Dunton said that the only thing to be done was to move to his cabin in the hills, on Indian Branch. There were bandages, food, arnica, iodine, a canoe, walls and a tight roof. He made a stretcher of two young birches and a pair of blankets.

They reached Dunton's cabin four hours later. Wilardson had called for frequent halts on the way, despite his size. Mrs. Wilardson was laid in the bunk; and as soon as there was hot water, Dunton told Wilardson to bathe the sprained ankle, and the sportsman obeyed. Dunton produced arnica and bandages. Wilardson made a poor job of the bandaging, causing his wife to wince more than once.

"Can't you do better than that?" asked Dunton.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Uneven. All wrong. Too tight and too loose."

"It feels perfectly comfortable, thank you," said Mrs. Wilardson.

"There you are, Johnson! She should know."

"She does, I haven't a doubt of it," returned Dunton, dryly.

He went out to cut the caribou meat and hang it in the smoke-house.

"I don't like that fellow," said the sportsman. "There's something fishy about him. He's queer. But he can't fool me."

"He seems a very ordinary sort of person to me," replied the lady, closing her eyes.

"Ordinary? He is an educated man, for one thing. Educated men are not ordinary in this benighted wilderness."

"Educated? I hadn't noticed it."

"And Johnson isn't his name."

She opened her eyes then, but after the briefest possible glance at her husband's face she closed them again.

"Not his name?" she whispered.

"He told me so. 'Call me Johnson, because it isn't my name,' he said. A banker in disgrace, I suppose—absconding cashier, or something of that sort. An insolent blighter, whatever else he may be."

"I thought him very polite."

"He's polite enough now, since I put him in his place."

"Please be honest, Norman. He is not polite to you. He speaks to you almost as rudely as you used to speak to our guides before they grew so sick of you that they ran away. He saw through you last night. It humiliates me. You are a bully—but you can't bully this man. And he was right about this bandage. It hurts unbearably."

"The bandage? Then why didn't you say so when I was putting it on?"

She opened her eyes, which were very blue, and looked at him.

"I should be sorry to have him suspect that I know you for the stupid, selfish bully you really are," she said.

Dunton entered the cabin at that moment, mended the fire on the hearth, and set about the preparation of the mid-day meal. The menu was not elaborate. When all was on the table—the roast, the bread, the stewed berries, the tea and condensed milk—Dunton looked at the woman in the bunk.

"You are still in pain!" he exclaimed.

"The bandage hurts," she said, without meeting his look.

He turned to Wilardson, who was already eating.

"Can't you do that right?" he asked.

"Fix it yourself, confound you!" cried the sportsman.

Dunton stepped to the bunk, unwound, moistened and rewound the bandage gently and swiftly, without so much as a glance at the woman's face.

"Better?" he asked, turning away.

"Much better, thank you," she answered.

Wilardson laughed unpleasantly and went on with his dinner. It was very evident that he was in a nasty temper. Mrs. Wilardson ate very little.

"Anything to smoke?" asked Wilardson.

Dunton produced a red tin of H.B.C. tobacco, coarse-cut but sound and sweet.

"Brought it in from Battle Harbor last summer," he said.

The sportsman eyed the tobacco sulkily.

"No cigarettes?" he asked.

Dunton stared at him.

"In my opinion, you made a mistake when you came into this country, Wilardson," he said. "It's not your line—not even with two guides, for a few weeks' shooting. You're too dashed fussy."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," retorted Wilardson, glaring.

Wilardson's eyes were the first to waver.

Dunton turned in the general direction of the bunk.

"Do you care to smoke?" he asked.

His voice was kindly, but wooden and impersonal, and he did not look at the woman's face. And yet it was a charming face.

"Our cigarettes ran out more than a week ago," she answered.

"Go ahead and say it was my fault!" exclaimed Wilardson.

Dunton dragged something out from under an end of the bunk and swung it up onto the table. It was a pack of heavy greenish canvas with broad straps for the shoulders, an important part of the British soldier's equipment. It was somewhat faded and showed a stain here and there. Mrs. Wilardson saw it and turned her face away. Wilardson stared at it. Dunton rummaged through its contents with both hands.

"So you're a returned man," said the sportsman.

"Returned is good," replied Dunton. "This is a likely place to return to."

"Well, you know what I mean. You saw service, did you?"

Dunton paid no further attention to the man. He drew forth a small flat box, looked at it, brushed a hand over it twice, then laid it against one of the woman's hands on the blankets.

"If you like this kind," he said, with nothing at all in his low voice except words. "They used to be well thought of. You will find them dry, I'm afraid. They have been in my pack a long time; years—uncommonly long years."

Then he walked out of the cabin. The woman immediately turned her face toward the room, glanced down at the box of cigarettes and clasped it in her fingers. But she did not smoke.

Dunton walked for two hours, careless of direction, now to the east, now south, at last north to Indian Branch of the big river. He heeded nothing that he saw. He stumbled frequently even when his glance was on the ground. Once he lay flat for ten minutes or so with his face in his hands. He was on the edge of the swift water when he became suddenly aware of it, and yet its voice had been loud in his ears for minutes. He stood motionless for a little while, staring into the dark current. There was snow already in the higher hills, he thought dully. The water was cold as ice. It could soon numb a man. Even a strong swimmer wouldn't last long in that water. He shivered suddenly, turned and retraced his steps to the cabin.

Dunton found both his guests beside the hearth.

"I made a crutch for her," said Wilardson, pointing to a trimmed length of sapling leaning against the wall.

"But you must keep that foot up as much as possible," said Dunton to Mrs. Wilardson. "The idea's to keep the blood out of it."

She was seated on a low stool of his own manufacture. He rolled up a stiff moose hide, placed it before her, and raised her injured foot gently until it rested on the roll almost on the level of her knee.

"We must get away in the morning," said Wilardson. "Is your canoe in good shape?"

"It should be," answered Dunton. "It's a canvas eighteen-footer; and there wasn't anything the matter with it when I last saw it, three or four days ago."

"I'll hire someone at the mouth of the river to return the canoe to you. I'll hire two men, Johnson, and send in a two-man load of provisions from the Company's store."

"But—but can you handle a canoe?"

"Of course I can handle a canoe! It's simple enough, when you're heading down stream."

"But you don't know the river."

"Why don't I know the river? I know Eskimo River. I came up it, didn't I?"

"So it seems. But you haven't been on Indian Branch."

"No, but what of it? It runs into the Eskimo. Just a matter of running with the current."

"Heaven help you if you run with the current from my landing to the Eskimo! There are two bits of bad water—three for a greenhorn. You would have to make three carries with the canoe and dunnage."

"Well, what of it? I can make three carries."

"It's tricky water all the way. It wouldn't be safe."

"Don't worry about me, Johnson."

"You? Don't flatter yourself."

"You need not worry about Mrs. Wilardson. I can look after her."

"I doubt it—but I am thinking of my canoe."

Wilardson jeered.

"So—the precious canoe? I overrated you, Johnson. I thought you were concerned about human lives. But you need not feel any uneasiness for the canoe. If it suffers any damage I shall pay you double its value."

"I am to collect from your estate, I suppose."

"Don't be a fool, Johnson! And try to be a sportsman. I am determined to start for the coast tomorrow, and your services on the trip down to the mouth of the Eskimo are neither desired nor required. I wish you well, but I don't like you, my dear man. Look the canoe over, will you. Half a minute! Here's the price, in advance."

Dunton stared at the sportsman in chilly silence for a full minute.

"You are feeling quite your own self again," he said. "I think you have forgotten that you were ever lost on the barrens in a fog. And you are pleased to be frank. Put your money away, Wilardson, for I wouldn't touch it with tongs. As for the price of a canoe—but forget it! My anxiety is for your wife's safety, if you really want to know. Drown yourself, if you want to—but I'll not let you take fool chances with a woman's life between here and the coast. So I shall accompany you as far as the mouth of Eskimo River."

"In spite of the fact that you are not wanted?" queried the woman without looking at him.

"Are you willing to take the chances of drowning?" he returned.

"Yes," she said.

Dunton turned sharply and left the hut. He walked swiftly down to the river.

Mr. Wilardson talked a great deal while Dunton was away, but his wife paid no attention to him. Half an hour passed, and then they heard Dunton's axe outside. Presently Wilardson went out and found the man of the wilderness chopping at the edge of the clearing, felling and trimming poles.

"What are you doing now?" asked the sportsman.

"Framing a lean-to," replied Dunton. "I'll roof it with brush and a tarpaulin."

"What's the idea?"

"Place to sleep until the river freezes hard."

"What's the matter with your cabin?"

"That's for you and Mrs. Wilardson."

"What the devil are you talking about? We are leaving tomorrow morning, as I've already told you a

dozen times. I don't want any more of your funny business, Johnson. A little more from you, and I'll have a talk about you to the factor down at the Post. The law has a long arm, Johnson."

"Wrong again," returned Dunton. "The long arm of the Law holds no terrors for me. But you won't go out tomorrow, Wilardson, unless you walk or swim. The canoe is gone. It isn't where I left it four days ago."

The big sportsman stared.

"What's that?" he cried.

"The canoe is gone. It isn't where I left it four days ago."

"You have hidden it, confound you! Find it again, and find it quick—or it will go hard with you."

"Don't threaten me, Wilardson. Can't you see that it's not the way to get along with me? But why should I hide the canoe? If I didn't want you to use it I'd tell you so—and you wouldn't use it. You have sense enough to see that, I hope."

"I can see enough. You might refuse the canoe to me, but you would be ashamed to refuse it to a woman. I can see through you, Johnson—though why you want to keep us here is more than I can imagine."

"If you can see so much, why don't you go and find the canoe?"

"That's exactly what I intend to do. But you must come with me."

Hours of search failed to discover anything of Dunton's canoe, and Wilardson swore savagely.

When Mrs. Wilardson heard of the disappearance of the canoe, she smiled scornfully but made no comment.

Dunton slept in his newly constructed lean-to that night, with a fire across the front of it. The frost struck hard, but he had plenty of hides and blankets and did not notice the cold. He got very little sleep, however. His growing distaste for Wilardson was like poison in his blood. In all his life he had never before met a man whom he disliked and despised so intensely as he did this big sportsman.

Wilardson spent hours of the next day along the rocky shore of Indian Branch, hunting for Dunton's canoe. His efforts again proved fruitless. Dunton paid no attention to either of his enforced guests. He rustled wood for an hour after breakfast, then went off with his shot-gun and remained away until sundown. He brought three brace of willow grouse and a big hare back with him. For supper he skinned and fried two of the fat grouse in true bushwhacker style. Wilardson was in a most unpleasant temper and sneered at the manner of cooking the birds—but he ate two-thirds of them.

"I want to talk to you," said Wilardson, as Dunton moved toward the door after supper. "We've got to come to an understanding," he continued, as the other turned and reseated himself beside the table. "You first met me under somewhat trying circumstances and have carried things with a high hand ever since."

Dunton glanced at him and then at the fire on the hearth, but did not speak.

"This can't go on," continued the sportsman. "I admit that my wife and I were fortunate in finding your fire on the barrens, but even if our lives were saved by that accident—it was purely accidental on your part—I intend to demand honesty and civility from you. I am willing to pay you well for all that you have done for us, and two hundred dollars for that canoe."

"The canoe is lost, as you know, and therefore out of the question," answered Dunton, quietly.

"I doubt that," returned Wilardson. "I am determined to know now where the canoe is and why you wish to keep us in this God-forsaken hole.

I have a pistol here, and my wife also is armed."

Dunton smiled.

"She might shoot, but you haven't the nerve to kill a man," he said. "You are a bully, but not a killer. To be quite frank, you are a coward."

"And you are a brave man, I suppose," said Mrs. Wilardson from the shadow of the bunk.

Dunton turned his face to the fire again in silence. Wilardson laughed.

"I am waiting to hear about the canoe," he said.

"I knew only one coward in France," said Dunton, slowly, without shifting his position or his glance. "It was a queer case. Only two people knew him to be a coward. His comrades—hundreds and thousands of men—don't know it yet; and they wouldn't believe it if they were told. He wasn't gun-shy."

"Tell me where you hid the canoe, Johnson," said the sportsman. "I have you covered; and I'm not in the mood to listen to your chatter about the late war."

"Shoot or shut up," retorted Dunton, still without moving.

Wilardson was beside himself with rage. He raised the pistol and rested his forearm on the edge of the table.

"Don't do it," said his wife, sharply.

Dunton waited, stooped slightly, gazing into the fire. He did not see the sportsman's weapon and the infuriated eyes behind it, but he imagined them. He neither saw nor imagined the woman's pistol: But Wilardson saw it from a corner of his right eye.

"It would be a mistake," said the woman. "It would be murder—and suicide."

Wilardson swore savagely.

"But I can't stand any more of his confounded cheek!" he cried.

"Please be very careful," she said.

He laughed harshly and pocketed the pistol.

Dunton stood up slowly and turned. Wilardson drew back from the other side of the little table, with his right hand in his pocket.

"We will take her down to the Post as soon as the ice is safe for a sled," said Dunton.

Then he left the cabin, without so much as a glance toward the bunk in which Mrs. Wilardson lay with her right hand beneath the edge of the blanket.

CHAPTER III

"I PREFER YOU UNARMED"

THERE was black ice on the little ponds next morning. Even the edges of the swift river were filmed with elastic ice for a distance of several feet from each shore. Moss and brown fern and grey rock were all white with frost.

Dunton breakfasted early and alone by his fire in the open, leaving his guests to shift for themselves. He shouldered his rifle and went eastward toward the barrens before a feather of smoke showed above the chimney of the cabin. He did not hunt for anything in particular. From the top of a high hummock he saw the antlers of a small herd of caribou trailing south and west, but he neither headed them nor followed them. If he thought at all of killing, it was not of the killing of meat. The sky was clear and the sunshine warmed toward noon. He sat in the sun and felt cold and nerveless. He tried not to think of anything; but memories crowded his mind and would not be denied and he felt miserably conscious of his present desolate situation. He was sorry for himself. He knew that thousands of good men, strong men, would pity him if they knew the truth.

The truth! There was nothing like it! But he had hidden it too long to tell now.

He thought of cowards and

cowardice. He had seen no physical cowards in the war, but he had suspected a number on the fringes of it. And this big fellow Wilardson, whatever he had done and whatever else he was, was a physical coward, a man afraid of being hurt. He recalled the incident of the man staggering to the fire in the fog and gulping drink and wolfing food, the disabled woman deserted and forgotten. That was the sort of coward that got his goat, disgusted him, made him see red, made him want to use a club. That was the sort of coward he had seen nothing of in France or Flanders—on his own side of the front, at least.

Dunton returned to the cabin at sundown, empty-handed. He found both his guests seated by the hearth, Mrs. Wilardson with her injured foot up on on a block of wood. He filled the kettle and hung it above the fire and took the frying-pan down from its nail. Wilardson was the first of the three to speak. He took up something from the floor beside his stool and laid it across his knees.

"Look at this," he said.

The illumination from the lantern and fire was not brilliant, and Dunton had to approach and stoop slightly to make the thing out.

"I found it half a mile below your landing and about two hundred yards back, between two big rocks," Wilardson continued. "What does it look like to you, Mr. Johnson?"

Dunton groaned.

"Will you never learn sense!" he returned, grimly. "Will you never learn to avoid trouble, to let well-enough alone? That, as you can see for yourself, is a charred fragment of the gunnel of a canvas canoe. If you think it belonged to my canoe, you are right, dead right. If you think that my canoe was burned, again you are right. I burned my canoe because Mrs. Wilardson refused to allow me to take you down to the mouth of the river in it and I knew that you wouldn't get through Indian Branch without me. If she had not objected to my accompanying you, I would have gone and seen you safely through. You can go drown yourself any time you feel like it, for all I care, but I could not sit calmly at home and let you drown a woman who is fool enough to trust herself to you. That's all about the canoe. If you ever mention it to me again I'll drag you out by the scruff of the neck and beat you up so you won't be able to see, smell or hear for a week."

"But—"

"You heard me."

"But, damn you, you can't—"

Dunton moved quickly as thought. His right arm shot out, his fingers gripped the sportsman a few inches below the chin.

"Say the word canoe, you poor dud, and I'll bash you and chuck you into the fire," he whispered.

For a second, Wilardson thought of hitting; and then he thought better of it. There was murder in Dunton's eyes.

"You're choking me! Be reasonable!" he cried.

His wife, seated at the other side of the hearth, turned her face away. Her lips were at once scornful and tremulous. The expression of her blue eyes was indescribable.

Dunton released his hold and continued his preparations for supper. The meal was eaten in silence. Mrs. Wilardson glanced covertly at Dunton now and again, but not once at her husband. Dunton turned a threatening gaze frequently upon the sportsman, but ignored the woman. Wilardson did not look once at either of his companions. There was no color in his big face and his hands trembled.

Supper was over and the dishes were washed when the woman broke the silence.

"I think you had better take our pistols and ammunition, Johnson," she said, casually. "Norman is more dangerous than you imagine and he is reaching for his coat now."

It was true. The coat was hanging beside the chimney and Wilardson was reaching for it. He swore and dipped his hand into one of the big side-pockets. It was the wrong pocket! He uttered an hysterical cry of rage and terror, withdrew his hand and plunged it into the other pocket. But Dunton was upon him before he could withdraw the pistol. He was gripped by wrist and throat, and the impact of the assault drove him backward along the wall to the rear of the cabin. The coat was torn from the nail and the pistol hopped on the rough floor.

Wilardson struck several mighty wollops with his free hand but landed on nothing but bunched muscles. Dunton closed tight with him. They wrestled, staggering, heaving, bumping against the rough logs of two walls. The woman took the lantern from the table and hobbled close to them and looked at their faces. Her husband's was both savage and afraid. Dunton's was calm but grim. Dunton's glance met hers for a moment.

"Please don't hurt him," she said, quietly.

Dunton nodded.

Mrs. Wilardson retired to the bunk with the lantern, to be out of the way. The fight whirled and bumped around the cabin. The sportsman was the heavier of the two by thirty pounds and the taller by two inches, but he was already making heavy weather of it. He grunted. He kept his feet under him with increasing difficulty. He was on the outer edge of all the swings. It was always his back that came into violent contact with the walls and chimney. The table went over with a clatter of tin dishes. They spun slowly in the middle of the room, like dancers. Wilardson gasped for breath, his knees felt like water and all hope of crushing Dunton with his superior weight died out of him. Then, quicker than his terrified brain could realize it, his hold on Dunton was broken and he was sent reeling violently from his point of balance without anything to cling to. He struck the wall and slid limply to the floor.

Dunton stooped above the fallen sportsman for a moment, laughed shortly and busied himself with collecting fire-arms and ammunition.

"He isn't hurt, but he is frightened almost to death," he said to the woman.

She held out a pistol to him. He extended a hand as if to take it, then shook his head and turned away.

"Keep it," he said. "If he gets it from you, it will be by our consent."

"I think he has just enough nerve to shoot you in the back," she whispered.

He did not look at her.

"What more fitting finish for a coward?—than to be shot in the back by a thing like your spineless husband?" he sneered.

"But I'll not let him have it," she whispered; and if he had looked at her then he would have seen that her blue eyes were gleaming with tears.

"Whatever your whim may suggest," he said, and left the cabin.

He placed the arms and ammunition in the lean-to, lit his fire and returned to the door of the cabin. He heard the murmur of voices from within. For two hours or more he paced back and forth between the lean-to and the cabin. The night was tingling with frost. At last, working silently, he padlocked the door of the cabin on the outside. He knew that the windows were far too small to admit of the passage of Wilardson's large body, and there was no axe inside the cabin. Then he rolled a log onto his fire and retired to his sleeping-bag.

Dunton was up and about before sun-rise. He hid the arms and cartridges, with the exception of his own rifle, in the roof of his store-house, then unlocked the door of the cabin without a sound and pocketed the padlock and key. He cooked and ate a breakfast of tea, hard-bread and smoked fish. He went into the woods a little way with his axe and rifle and set to work clearing out a tangle of dry "blow-downs." He could see the cabin from where he worked. He had chopped for an hour before the first thin wisp of smoke topped the squat chimney. Ten minutes later, the door opened and Wilardson appeared on the threshold, kettle in hand. Dunton went on with his chopping and the sportsman filled the kettle at the spring and returned to the cabin.

Wilardson reappeared half an hour later. Dunton was still at work trimming out the dry spruces and chopping them into three-foot lengths. The sportsman approached him slowly and halted half a dozen yards away.

"I want to suggest that we—ah, cut out the—the unpleasantness," said the sportsman, his glance wandering.

"It is all the same to me," returned Dunton.

"But it is foolishness, madness, situated as we are!" exclaimed Wilardson. "It is unreasonable. Let us make a new start. You took a dislike to me that first night, and I admit that I didn't cut a heroic figure—but please forget it. I was confused; and I did not know that I was dealing with a man from civilization. We are not savages."

Dunton smiled but did not speak.

"We are both educated men," continued the sportsman. "I am willing to forget about the destruction of the canoe, and I hope you will forget my outburst of temper last night. I am in a hurry to get out of here and back to Montreal. I am needed there. Let us be friends, and so save time and trouble and make the remainder of our stay a little less unpleasant for Mrs. Wilardson. Yes, let us be friends, Johnson. I can't see any reason for our being enemies."

"I have no intention of harming or delaying either you or your wife," replied Dunton. "I burned my canoe because it was the only way, under the circumstances, to save you both from drowning. As soon as the ice will hold us, I shall see you safely down to the Post at the mouth of Eskimo River, where you'll be able to get men and a fore-and-after to take you to Battle Harbour; and this is what I intended to do all the time. And until the ice is set on the river I shall continue to see that you have the best shelter I can offer, plenty of food and plenty of fuel. On the other hand, I shall safeguard myself against your tricky temper. You drew a gun on me once and you tried it again, so I mean to see that you don't make a third move of that sort. As for friendship, that is out of the question."

"But we must trust each other."

"You may trust me, Wilardson."

"And you may trust me—on the word of a gentleman."

"I shall do everything in my power to get you and Mrs. Wilardson safely out of here. A week of this weather will make the sled-journey possible."

"You are very good. I admit that I have been hot-headed and that I was unreasonable about the canoe. But we shall get along very comfortably now that we understand one another. Ah, by the way—about the guns?"

"Everything shall be returned to you at the mouth of the river."

"But, my dear fellow, we have put distrust behind us."

"I prefer you unarmed, Wilardson, so please don't argue."

The sportsman returned to the cabin.

Dunton did not enter the cabin that day. He piled wood beside the door but did not cross the threshold. He wandered abroad all afternoon, but did not uncase his rifle. He returned to the little clearing after nightfall and retired to his lean-to. He left his sleeping-bag before midnight, crossed the clearing and padlocked the door of the cabin. When he arose at dawn to unfasten the door, snow was falling.

Snow continued to fall in crisp, small flakes until noon, for the windless air was bitterly cold. Dunton breakfasted outside by himself, but entered the cabin soon afterward. Wilardson was frying venison and cursing the smoke, but he smoothed out his face and his language at the sight of Dunton. Mrs. Wilardson, seated beside the hearth, was trying to toast a slice of Dunton's stale yet clammy home-made bread. She, too, wished the man of the wilderness a polite good-morning. Dunton replied politely enough, fetched water, produced a tin of condensed milk and a bottle of stewed partridge-berries and took over the cooking. Their breakfast was soon on the table. He drank a mug of tea with them but did not eat, explaining that he had already breakfasted.

Mrs. Wilardson was able to move about without the crutch by this time, but she walked with a slight limp. But even the limp was graceful, Dunton thought.

CHAPTER IV

WHITE WATER

Philip Dunton was not the only person who despised and disliked Norman Wilardson. Even up there in the wilderness on Indian Branch there was another who despised him and was swiftly learning to hate him—the man's own wife. In cities, shielded from dangers and fatigue, surrounded by luxuries, soothed by calculating flattery and servility, full-fed and comforted with flagons, he had managed for more than a year to hide the worst qualities of his real nature from her. She had soon discovered that he was selfish, and she had early heard that he was cruel in business; but it was the ill-advised expedition to Eskimo River after caribou that had opened her eyes to the depths of his selfishness and cruelty and the fact that he was a bully and a coward. Her eyes had been opened thus far even before the desertion of the two guides. And since then she had seen to the despicable depths of him. His bellowing, bullying, insulting treatment of the guides had been bad enough, and his outburst of temper at her protests had been worse, but worse still had been his futile rage and yammering terror upon learning that the guides had gone and taken with them the canoe and the bulk of the provisions. And his treatment of her in the fog had been monstrous.

Cowardice was the key-note of Wilardson's character. In the world he figured as a strong man, hard in business but public-spirited. Only his secretaries suspected the yellow streak in him—in the world of banks and theatres and drawing-rooms and clubs. He had enemies, which was only to be expected of a strong and successful man: But even his most bitter enemies in the great world did not know the truth about him.

The whole truth of Wilardson was known only to those who had seen him in the stark wilderness of the Eskimo River country. Even the factor and store-keeper at the Hudson's Bay Company's post at the mouth of the river did not know him. They had seen only the big, wealthy Mr. Norman Wilardson garbed and armed and equipped as a robust sportsman and accompanied by his charm-

ing wife and two willing and humble guides from Dog-sledge Cove. They, the factor and the store-keeper, had admired everything about the great man and the blue-eyed lady except their idea of how and where to have a rest and a good time.

The two guides from Dog-sledge Cove, so willing and humble in their ignorance, had in time grown wise to the real Wilardson.

Bill Praddle and Nick Dugan were Liviers, men of white blood established on the desolate Labrador. Their fathers had coasted "down North" from Newfoundland and settled in Dog-sledge Cove. They lived to keep life in them, but gave very little thought to their miserable condition. They fished, killed deer, trapped a little fur for trade, shot or "batted" seals when the Greenland ice-floe was driven onto the coast. Bill and Nick were honest, and they were as humble as they were ignorant of everything but the bitter toil of keeping life in themselves and their families in Dog-sledge Cove—but deep in the dulled heart of each glowed a spark of the Old Adam. Norman Wilardson had blown upon those sparks and heated the dull blood to fury. Had there been a cross of any brisker blood in the veins of either of the guides—a dash of French or Spanish, for instance, or a strain of Mountaineer Indian or Micmac—murder would have been done on Eskimo River; and small blame to the murderers! But the blood of the Praddles and Dugans of Dog-sledge Cove was slow to heat to the killing point. So, furious, and fearful and humiliated, the guides had deserted in the night and taken the canoe and the bulk of the provisions with them.

Bill Praddle and Nick Dugan had descended the Eskimo to within six miles of the Post at its mouth. They were afraid to show themselves to the factor without the Wilardsons, so they landed on the southern shore and took to the barrens with the dunnage and the big canoe. Twenty miles would bring them to Dog-sledge Cove and their little grey cabins in the clefts of the cliffs—straight miles as flown by homing crows. It doesn't sound far—but these poor Liviers had no wings, and the big canoe was twenty-two feet long and broad of beam and heavy of frame and ribs. The canoe was a neck-torturing load for both of them, the dunnage was lumpy and a strong man's load, and the way was neither straight nor smooth. Jumbled rocks, bogs, wide tangles of spruce-tuck and crooked ponds lay and lumped between them and home.

With packs on their backs and topped by the big canoe, the runaway guides advanced four miles southward by staggering five. They halted, got out from under the canoe, slipped their packs and lay down. They were sore inside and outside, and uneasy. Bill Praddle spat on the polished flank of the canoe and said that if it was teetering on the brink of the bottomless pit he wouldn't so much as reach out a hand to save it.

"Nor Wilardson, neither," said Nick Dugan, feeling in a ragged pocket for his black stump of a pipe.

"May the devil fetch dat one!" exclaimed Bill. "May every hair on his head turn into a rusty spike an' prick into his brain! Him, wid his heart o' icy rock an' his belly o' pride an' his cursin' tongue an' rabbit's liver! May the devil take a two-handed twist on his black gizzard an' fetch 'im a bat on his bellowin' mout'!"

"Sure, b'y, an' worse nor dat," returned Nick, filling and lighting his pipe.

"An' here we be a-headin' for Dog-sledge Cove wid nary a bill for all our toil an' shame, an' the bread-bin empty an' the fish sweated," said Bill in a voice of despair. "Dogs baint used like us two was used by

Wilardson, Nick me lad. Dogs wouldn't stand for it! An' what be our wages? A canoe! Aye, a canoe—to hide among the rocks for fear a word o' it gits to the ears o' Mister Hill down to the Post. An' a back-freight o' dirty tinned grub onfit for decent bellies! An' the big black bellowin' beast would make t'ieves an' murderers o' two honest lads for wort'less t'ings like dat!"

"Backache an' belly-ache an' heart-ache be all as ever comes to the like o' us, Bill—an' dat rich big squid from up-along will sure be the shameful deat's o' us yet, wid ropes 'round our necks."

"We run off an' left him, for fear o' our mortal lives."

"Aye, but we fetched the grub an' the canoe along wid us. The Law will make murder o' that. An' I be a-wishin' as how we'd fetched out the woman. Herself had a good heart, human as poverty."

"If I was back wid the black squid I'd not run from him again, by all the blessed saints! The cold fright do be gone out me, Nick, and the red anger be lit in me blood. Aye, a dog would turn an' kill his master for the abuse an' the curses Wilardson put on us! An' nary a bill to show for it; an' murder at our heels; an' winter a-comin' with the belly-pinch for our women an' children. Lay hold on yer pack an' the canoe, Nick, an' you an' me will turn about an' go back an' save the poor woman an' fill Wilardson's mout' wid his dirty rich blood."

"Not me, Bill. I be a-goin' home wid this here grub for the empty pots. Sure I be grieved for dat woman—but she married soft, an' she can blame her own self if the dyin' be hard."

"I'll have murder on me hands but not on me immortal soul!" cried Praddle. "Murder it be, go nort' or go sout'—but I'll save the woman who was kind to us; an' when the Law takes me for the deat' o' Norman Wilardson I'll go contented wid the red memory of it. Leave yer pack where it lays, Nick, to carry sout' wid ye on the way back, an' lend me a hand wid the canoe back to the river."

So they carried the canoe and half the provisions north again to Eskimo River. There the friends parted, Praddle going west and Dugan heading south again for Dog-sledge Cove.

Praddle kept close to the southern shore of the river, in shallow water. He was a good boatman and riverman, seasoned to salt-water and fresh, trained to canoe and batteaux and skiff and bully. But he was not a deep-sea sailor, had never been more than fifteen miles off the coast or farther south than Battle Harbor. He had been born and bred by cold waters—water so bitterly cold even in summer, so numbing to blood and muscle, that he had never learned to swim. In this he was not peculiar. Few of the Liviers on that coast can swim half a dozen strokes.

Praddle stood aft in the long canoe and plied the white pole tirelessly, crawling steadily up toward the man from whom he had run away. His mind was made up. He knew his mission and pictured every possible result of it without wavering. He realized now that he and Nick Dugan had been fools to desert the man and woman from up-along under cover of darkness, with a canoe that was of no use to them under the circumstances, with nothing to repay them for their crime and their toil save a few pounds of queer food. They should have taken the woman, who deserved nothing but kindness at their hands, and delivered her to Mr. Hill at the Post, along with a true story of Wilardson's behavior. She would not have denied the facts, he thought, and thus they would have saved their consciences and perhaps their necks. But in that there would

not have been anything with which to feed the hungry people of Dog-sledge Cove, unless the woman was as eager to get away from the big sportsman as they were. Or they might have sacrificed peace-of-mind to profit, robbed Wilardson of the money he carried—(they had seen fat rolls of it)—and fled by land. Any way would have been better than the way they had actually taken.

Bill Praddle's hatred of the big fellow from the great world of men and money grew hotter and deeper with every mile of toil up the desolate, swift river. He did not fear Wilardson now. He would face him, confront him eye to eye, slap his big face, bring him to his knees, beat him up, make him cry for mercy, perhaps kill him, certainly collect his and Nick Dugan's wages. He would show the rich beast that he, Bill Praddle, was a man despite his poverty. He would make him eat every insulting word of the past, recall every sneering curse, take back every bellowed threat. Wilardson had kicked him once. Very well, he would kick Wilardson ten times for that. Wilardson had struck him twice. Ah! He would shower blows upon the full-fed devil, by all the blessed saints in Heaven with stars in their hair! Perhaps Wilardson would offer him money—hundreds of dollars? Good! He would take the money—when he was tired of beating him. Perhaps Wilardson would fight? Good again! It would be Wilardson's last fight; and still there would be the money for Bill Praddle. Whatever he might do to Wilardson, he would bring the woman out safely to the coast and then escape from Dog-sledge Cove with his wife and children.

Praddle climbed the river without sight or sound of humanity. He towed the big canoe up the rapids. During the day, he kept a sharp eye out for the Wilardsons, thinking that they might have followed afoot down the river—but he failed to remark any sign of them. He slept in the lee of the high bank, rolled in blankets beside a big fire. The frost struck hard, and in the nippy mornings he had to break the new ice away from the rocks before he could launch the canoe. It was slow work. Not until the afternoon of the fourth day after parting from Nick Dugan did he reach the site of the camp in which he had last seen the Wilardsons. He landed a hundred yards below the spot and approached it cautiously on foot, for the rich man from up-along had a rifle and a gun and pistols and he was unarmed save for a knife with a buck-horn haft and a heavy-backed five-inch blade.

Praddle need not have been so careful, for the site was vacant. Only a tarpaulin, the ashes and charred butts of dead fires, empty bottles and cans and a belt-axe remained. At least so it seemed to Praddle at the first glance. He searched the ground and the bushes, giving most of his attention to the spot in the thicket where the rich folk's little tent of oiled silk had stood. There he found a little spirit-stove, a silly and useless contraption from up-along for the quick brewing of a cup of tea. This article of a rich sportsman's outfit reminded him so painfully of Wilardson that he booted it into the river. Further search in the moss brought to light a large silver flask nearly full of whiskey. It was dented on one side as if it had been stepped on. Praddle refreshed himself from it, then pocketed it with care.

Praddle scouted around. He climbed the steep bank, through the heavy brush, to the edge of the great barrens and looked abroad over the waste of rocks and bogs and black shadows of spruce. His eyes were far-sighted, adjusted from birth to wide sea spaces and the vast sweeps of barrens. He ascended a hummock

to its topmost boulder and surveyed the landscape. He looked for smoke but did not find it. Then he looked far and wide for movement and saw a small herd of caribou far off to the west, led slowly toward the shelter of the wooded hills by a big grey stag. He studied the nearer ground after that, yard by yard, and soon spotted something which did not seem to blend perfectly with its surroundings. He scrambled down the southern slope of the hummock, made his way over jumbled rocks and around tangles of spruce-tuck and presently stooped and picked up the thing that had caught his eye. It was a fine new gun-case of heavy yellow leather which he had often seen before. On one side the following inscription was painted very elegantly in small black letters:—Mrs. Norman Wilardson, Montreal. He opened the case and gazed reflectively at the costly and elaborate contents.

"Me an' mine would feed hearty from now clear t'rough to May, wid figgy-duff to our dinner t'ree times every week, on half the price she give for dis here little gun an' all the fancy fixin's," he murmured. He took out the twelve-gauge barrels, masterpieces of the gunsmiths' craft; then the polished stock with its slender pistol-grip. He fitted the little gun together and balanced it in his hands, thinking dully of hunger and wealth and the basic problems of life in general. He took the ammunition, which was its own compartment in the case —twenty-four rounds—and slipped two cartridges into the gun and stowed the rest away about his person. He pocketed the pull-through and oil-flask also; and the fine case was empty. He ripped the strong leather to tatters with his knife, hammered the frame flat with the belt-axe, and buried the wreck between two high boulders with brush and lesser stones to hold it and hide it.

Praddle shot a brace of willow-grouse before sunset and ate a hearty supper. He slept that night in the shelter of the tarpaulin, deep in the brush under the high bank. Snow fell during the night and all morning. He spent the afternoon on the barren, hunting for further signs of the Wilardsons. He found a dunnage-bag full of beautiful and correct attire for the well-dressed sportsman (as imagined and recommended by tailors),—woolly jackets plastered with pockets, woolly knickerbockers, silk underclothes, flannel shirts as soft as silk, stockings thick and soft, yellow boots and fur-lined gloves. He shouldered the bag and carried it six miles back to the river.

It was clear to Bill Praddle's anxious mind and uneasy conscience that the Wilardsons had attempted to reach the coast on foot by way of the trackless barrens, and he knew that it would be useless for him to look for them in that waste. The Great South Barrens, this particular expanse of treeless and manless desolation, extended from Eskimo River to Lance-au-Loup far to the southward of Battle Harbor, and westward to the mountains a varying distance of thirty to fifty miles. Ten thousand square miles, just about, was what the area of the Great South Barrens figured out, with a length of two hundred and fifty miles and an average width of forty. But these figures were not for Bill Praddle. He only knew that the barrens filled most of his world between the sea from which he took cod and caplin and seal to the mountain to which he sometimes followed the caribou in mid-winter, and that there was no permanent human habitation in all its rugged length and breadth. There was still game on the barrens, grouse and hares in plenty; and the Wilardsons still possessed a rifle and a shotgun, so far as Praddle knew, and tea and beef-extract and tinned meats; and the distance between the camp

on Eskimo River and Dog-sledge Cove was not more than fifty miles in a straight-line; and yet Praddle did not believe that they would reach Dog-sledge Cove or any other settlement on the coast. He tried to believe that they were safe, but he couldn't fool himself. He remembered the fog, the snow, the cold and Wilardson's yellow streak and wild temper.

Praddle thought hard that night while he smoked by the fire; and even after he had knocked the ashes from his pipe and rolled in his blankets, his brain and conscience kept him awake for hours. The fate of the woman with the blue eyes lay heavy on his heart.

Praddle remembered Philip Dunton, the mysterious gentleman from up-along who lived like a hermit on Indian Branch. He had accompanied Dunton into his chosen wilderness, up the Eskimo to the Fork and then up the swifter Indian Branch, close onto three years ago; and he had helped to build the cabin—all for a generous wage. He liked Dunton, who had treated him like a man. He had last seen him in June, down at the Post, but he supposed that he was still alive and on Indian Branch. Now he wondered if Dunton knew anything about the Wilardsons. He would, if any man did, for he often spent days together out on the barrens. And even if Dunton had not seen anything of the Wilardsons, Praddle felt that it would be a wise move to visit him and talk over the unfortunate situation and ask for advice.

Poor Bill Praddle felt that he needed a friend, a strong and wise friend; and he believed the mysterious Dunton to be a powerful person and entertained a high opinion of his qualities of mind and heart. Like most people, Praddle believed that he knew a gentleman when he saw one; and he had spotted Dunton for a gentleman within five minutes of first meeting him.

He was up against it. To look for the Wilardsons on the barrens was hopeless. If they died in the wilderness, he would have the death of the woman on his soul; and, sooner or later, Mr. Hill of the H. B. C. would suspect trouble and nose it out and set the machinery of the law in motion. If the Wilardsons won through the Dog-sledge Cove his conscience would be clear and his soul stainless, but the law would be set to work very swiftly and he and Nick would be jailed for theft. In either case, he needed advice and a strong friend. He cursed the big devil Wilardson for not sitting tight on the river, where he had been left, and waiting to be decently beaten—perhaps decently murdered.

Praddle broke the shore-ice again next morning and launched the canoe and continued his ascent of the river. He reached the Fork by sun-down. Again he broke ice—and there was more of it to break each morning—and turned up Indian Branch. Here his slow progress was even slower, for Indian Branch was a swifter stream than the big river and was broken into "ripples" and white water at frequent intervals.

CHAPTER V

THROUGH A FROSTY WINDOW

Winter tightened its grip on Indian Branch. Dunton continued to pass his nights in the lean-to and breakfast by himself, but he was in and out of the cabin may times each day and ate his dinners and suppers with his guests.

A veneer of peace glossed the intercourse of the woman and the two men, thinner than the first skim of ice on flowing water. Dunton did not pretend friendship for Wilardson, but he did his best to be polite. His breeding made this easy for him, up

to a certain point. But at times his emotions showed through the veneer like a red shadow. He continued to keep the arms hidden and to fasten the cabin door on the outside every night. His manner toward Mrs. Wilardson was considerate but decidedly cool. He seldom addressed her and even more rarely looked at her.

Mrs. Wilardson was polite, but no more than that. She showed her scorn of her husband in her eyes; and perhaps she voiced something of it when Dunton was not present. She said little to either of the men. She glanced frequently at Dunton when not observed, the expression of her blue eyes tortured and inscrutable.

Wilardson was the best actor of the three. His manner toward his host was frequently cordial. He pretended friendship and an honest robustness of character. He was magnanimous—under the peculiar circumstances. He was full of hearty talk and fairly good stories—when Dunton was present. But he never looked Dunton squarely in the eye for more than a second at a time. There were things in his heart which might show in his eyes, and two of them were fear and cunning. His immediate aim in life was to get safely out to civilization, back to his own stamping-ground and the place and condition of his power, and for this he twisted his face into smiles and oiled his voice and kept a grip on his bullying black temper. After that, he would square accounts with this fellow Johnson, whatever and whoever he might be, though it cost him thousands. And after that again—well, it was evident that his wife needed disciplining. And the two guides from Dog-sledge Cove who had deserted him on Eskimo River must not be forgotten. He would see that each of them got a five-year term in the penitentiary at St. John's, Newfoundland, and so make the Labrador safe for plutocracy.

The hundreds of ponds on the barrens froze deep, the last herd of deer sought the hills, the last patch of brown on the big hares turned white as snow. Ice covered Indian Branch from shore to shore except at the roaring rapids. Great air-holes gaped where the broken white waters leaped strongest, steaming white in the frosty air. Snow fell, dry and small, and drifted. Dunton got out his sled and looked it over, set a new bolt in one of the wide iron shoes and renewed the raw-hide traces. It was a small dog-sled—but he had no dogs. With a light load, a level way and two strong men in the traces, it would go very well, however. He had pulled it many weary miles single-handed. He got out his snow-shoes, of which he had only two pairs, and mended the webbing in spots.

Ice forced Bill Praddle to abandon the big canoe. He dragged it halfway up the bank, laid it between two great rocks with the bulk of his dunnage beneath it and covered all with brush. He continued his journey on foot, warmly and correctly clothed in the discarded garments of his enemy, with blankets and a light pack on his shoulders and the priceless little gun in his gloved hands. He traveled on the firm, level ice close in-shore.

Praddle left the river two hours after sunset one cold and windy night. The dry snow drifted and swirled about him, but he knew the ground. He soon reached the edge of Dunton's sheltered clearing and was about to advance upon the cabin when the red glow of a low fire at the edge of the timber caught his attention. He halted and considered the matter. He could see shafts of light from the small windows of the cabin. Then why the fire in the open? Could it be that Dunton had visitors?—and

so many that the cabin could not hold them all?

The door of the cabin opened, and for a second a human figure was silhouetted against the glow of lantern-light. The door closed. Praddle crouched where he stood, straining ears and eyes against the black and white obscurity of the night. He caught a dull crunch of footsteps through the puffing of the wind. The wind lulled for a moment and he heard a faint crackling of dry brush across near the low red smudge of the fire; and then he saw a spurt of sparks ascend and vanish and, a second later, yellow flames lick up above the red.

An uneasy conscience made Bill Praddle cautious. He moved silently around toward the fire, crouched low against the black edge of young spruces. As he drew near to his objective a little eddy of wind brought him a fleeting scent of burning tobacco—it was good tobacco—the kind smoked by Dunton. Could it be that Dunton slept outside, crowded out by his visitors? What was the idea? Who were his visitors? Good natured as he was, he would scarcely put himself to such inconvenience for a bunch of Mountaineer Indians. No, it was not at all likely that Dunton himself was camped in the open. It was much more likely that the man or men beside the fire were smoking Dunton's tobacco.

Praddle saw the lean-to by the shine of the fire, and a seated figure within. A stick broke in the fire, and by the up-fling of brighter light he saw that the solitary occupant of the shelter was the mysterious Dunton himself.

Praddle's uneasiness increased. New misgivings assailed him, many of them confused and vague. Could it be that the police were here, already searching for him? No, they would never search for him on Indian Branch, but wait for him in Dogsledge Cove. Perhaps a party from the Post, headed by Mr. Hill himself, was hunting for the Wilardsons. That would be more likely, for Mr. Hill was a little friend of the rich, hoping to be rich himself some day. And yet how could canoes or sledges have ascended Eskimo River and Indian Branch without being seen by Praddle? They couldn't have done it.

Praddle was sorely puzzled. He backed away from the lean-to without making his presence known to Dunton, and edged around to the back of the cabin, where there was a little window. But nothing was to be learned there, for the two small lights of the window were so heavily frosted that nothing could be seen through them. They glowed with the warm shine within, but they disclosed nothing.

Praddle crept around a corner to another window. This, too, was frosted on the inside, but in a corner of one pane there was a spot of clear glass no larger than a human eye. To this spot Praddle set his right eye.

He saw the lighted lantern on the table, and beyond the table the hearth and its leaping fire. He could not see the bunk, for it was built against the same wall in which the window he was peering through was set. He saw a man seated beside the hearth, beyond the little table—a tall, large man smoking a fine pipe. He recognized the pipe, then the man. Wilardson!

Bill Praddle was astonished, to put it mildly. Wilardson! That black devil, that yellow-livered squid, away up here on Indian Branch, alive and hearty and smoking his grand pipe beside Dunton's fire! And alone! And Dunton out in the lean-to!

Praddle stepped back from the window, breathing unevenly as if he had run a mile over rough ground at top speed. His heart knocked and his brain was befogged. What was the meaning of it? Dunton must

have found the big sportsman on the barrens and brought him home. Yes, that was it—but why did Dunton sleep outside? And where was the woman?

"If he've harmed her—if he've come off the barrens widout her—if herself baint safe—by all the livin' saints o' God, but I'll kill 'im wid me knife afore the break o' tomorry!" he gasped, shaking and choking with rage and horror.

He returned to the window and again set his eye to the spot of unfrosted glass. He was just in time to see Wilardson leave his seat and kneel on the floor at one side of the chimney. The big fellow dug at the floor with a knife and presently lifted a couple of short sections of poles. He replaced these a few seconds later and returned to his seat. He was smiling. He raised a bottle to his lips and held it there a long time.

At that sight, Praddle felt his gorge rise and smoke more bitterly than ever. If he had hated Wilardson before, now he hated him beyond any power of expression. The black devil! The bellowing devil! And where was the woman with the blue eyes?—and him sitting there thieving the good Mister Dunton's rum and swilling it fit to bust himself! Aye, and the owner of the fine cabin out in a lean-to in the drift of the snow! And the woman? Starved to death long ago with the cold, like as not, stiff out on the barrens!

The thought and the sight were too much for Bill Praddle. The fact that he knew himself to be partially guilty of the woman's fate simply blackened his rage toward Wilardson. The dirty squid! The heartless black guzzler, sitting there at his ease guzzling precious rum!

Praddle stepped back a pace from the window, pulled the fur-lined glove from his right hand and inserted his hand into the fronts of his outer and inner coats. For a moment he had thought of pushing the barrels of the gun through the frosty glass and letting fly two charges of partridge-shot—but that would have been clumsy work. No, he would do the deed neatly and surely, at close quarters! He found the haft of the knife, drew the weapon from its sheath and placed it handily in a side-pocket of his outer coat. (Mr. Wilardson's tailor had made the pockets wide and deep and roomy, good man, little suspecting what they would be used for and by whom.) He buttoned his coats, regloved his hand and moved stealthily along the wall toward the front of the cabin, where the door was. He would slip quietly inside, close the door behind him and dispatch his business with Wilardson. After that would be time enough to plan the next step.

He was within a foot of the corner when he heard something. The sound was faint and furtive but very near. He shrunk against the logs and remained motionless for a few seconds, scarcely breathing. Then he sank forward onto his hands and knees and peered cautiously around the butts of the mortised logs. He saw a figure dimly, within three yards of him, stooping close in front of the closed door. It was Dunton, beyond a doubt. Was Dunton about to open the door and catch the big sport from upalong in the act of guzzling his precious rum? It was an agreeable thought to Bill Praddle.

Dunton did not open the door. He moved noiselessly back from it and vanished in the direction of the lean-to.

Praddle slipped around the corner and along to the door. He stooped, stared closely at the door and saw the heavy chain and big padlock. So! Wilardson was a prisoner! Dunton's prisoner. So Wilardson and Dunton were not friends. Good! But why did Dunton hand over the whole cabin to his prisoner and occupy the

lean-to? This was being too good-natured, surely. Praddle felt that there was something more to it than good nature, something that was too deep for him to get at in a hurry.

Praddle was about to move away from the door to take another look through the window, when the bellowing voice which he hated more than any other sound in the world was raised within the cabin. It came faintly to him through the heavy door, but the tone was unmistakable to Praddle, who had heard it many times raised against himself at this same pitch of bullying mad fury. It was terrific and shook him for a moment. It dashed his courage for a moment. All his old fear for the big man from up-along, the fear that had caused Nick Dugan and himself to run away in the night, drove back into his heart.

Wilardson was cursing someone as he had so often cursed his guides on Eskimo River. Praddle raced back to the window and was about to look through the peep-hole in the frosted pane when he heard the small, sharp report of a pistol from within. He broke the breech of the gun, pushed in two shells, then set his eye to the spot of clear glass.

There was Wilardson cowering back against the table, facing the window with abject fear in his eyes. But he was not looking at the window. He was staring at something a little to the left of it which Praddle could not see. His lips moved, but no sound of his voice reached the guide now. Terror had cracked and muffled it. Praddle could see his hands, and they were empty. Who had fired the shot, then? Had the big fellow gone mad of a guilty conscience and fired at himself, or at nothing, and then dropped the pistol? But he saw something. It was in his eyes that he saw something—something from which he shrank in terror. Perhaps it was something no bullet could harm. That thought sent an icy tingle down Praddle's spine despite all his fine warm shirts and coats.

Praddle could not see the door, but he suddenly heard sounds at it, the grind of a key in a lock and the rattle of a chain. He knew that Dunton had heard the shot and returned to the cabin. He did not shift his startled and devouring eye from the corner of the window or so much as blink it. He saw Wilardson turn his head toward the door, and then he saw Philip Dunton. By the sudden crooked leap and sway of the flames in the chimney, he knew that Dunton had left the door open. Quick as thought, he turned aside from the window and moved swiftly and silently along the wall again and around the corner to the door. Yes, the door was open. He lay flat, close against the foundation-log, and raised his head until his eyes were just above the threshold.

Praddle saw Mrs. Wilardson kneeling up in the bunk with a pistol gleaming in her hand. Of course the simple soul mistook her for a ghost, at the first glimpse—but a sniff of the exploded charge reassured him. This pistol was real, and ghosts don't fire real pistols. Mrs. Wilardson was alive! His heart jumped with blessed relief at that realization. His conscience was clean. His immortal soul was safe. He heard her voice.

"He drank for courage and then tried to take the pistol from me," she said. "So I fired a shot—and look at him now! I didn't touch him—but look at him! He was working himself up. He intended to murder you in your sleep. But look at him now!"

"I see him," returned Dunton, coolly. "Not a sight for a brave and particular woman to be proud of, I must say! But I was safe. The door was locked."

At that moment, Wilardson leaped at Dunton and struck with the black bottle. Dunton dodged, quick as a

cat, and the bottle shattered on the muscles of his left shoulder. The table went over with a crash and the lighted lantern rolled, spluttering, onto the hearth. But the lighter and more active man was working at top speed. He had the upper hand from the first and kept it. Wilardson fought the air, whirling toward the open door. Even the rum he had gulped was against him. Dunton kept right with him, hot after him, striking, hustling, but not once falling into a clinch.

Bill Praddle squirmed back from the threshold just in the nick of time to avoid being stepped upon as the two gentlemen from up-along emerged from the cabin. Wilardson, who came out backward and staggering, tripped and fell, flung himself around in the snow, scrambled to his feet and bolted. Dunton dashed after him into the darkness. Then Mrs. Wilardson darted forth and vanished in their wake.

Bill Praddle had been thinking fast since his glimpse of the woman alive in the bunk. His conscience was clear of the woman and even of the man. They were both alive, as far as he and his friend Nick Dugan were concerned, and the law could not possibly hold anything against them except the theft of a canoe and a little grub. The moral account with the bullying black devil was being settled by Mr. Dunton, so it was no longer the affair of the humble Bill Praddle of Dog-sledge Cove. All this being so, Praddle saw his next move, and his next and his next, clear as pictures in a book. Self-preservation and the welfare of his wife and children were the only things he had to worry about and work for now.

Within ten seconds of Mrs. Wilardson's hasty departure from the cabin, Praddle entered it, bent double, quick as a mink. He did not touch the door. The light from the hearth lit only half the cabin. The lantern, which had contained very little oil, was already a black and unillmuninating wreck among the red embers.

Praddle darted around in the shadows to the far side of the chimney, where he had seen Wilardson's coats hanging against the wall. He frisked them, and in three seconds found what he wanted—a fat roll of paper money. He slipped out of the cabin, and not a moment too soon.

Wilardson entered, pushed by Dunton who had a grip on the back of his neck. The woman followed Dunton. Wilardson's eyes were bunged and his mouth was bleeding. The woman closed the door.

Praddle, clear of conscience and light of heart and greatly comforted by what he had seen of Wilardson's humiliation, hastened to the lean-to and from Dunton's supply added half a pound of tea, a chunk of frozen meat and a small red tin of tobacco to his pack. He saw the two pairs of snowshoes and considered them, keeping an eye all the while on the darkness in the direction of the cabin in case a sudden yellow glow should signal the opening of the door.

"I be for the barrens an' the shortest way home, where the snow lays deep, but dese folks be for the long an' easy way, if dey ever goes out alive," he reflected. "Sure I needs the racquets, one pair o' dem, worse'n dey folks from up-along needs two pairs. The wind do allus keep a clean track scooped on the river, whatever way she blows, under one bank or tudder, so what be the use o' racquets to dem as travels dat route? Dey be as well widout 'em, sure, wid the snow no deeper nor gravy on a rich man's dinner-plate an' the grand level ice under it all the way."

So he helped himself to the pair of snowshoes that looked the tougher of the two. He left the lean-to, with pack and snowshoes on his shoulders and the gun still in his hand, and returned to the cabin and peered

through the window for the third time. By the firelight he saw Dunton and Wilardson lying peacefully on the floor with hides and blankets under them. Wilardson's arms and legs were bound with ropes. He could not see Mrs. Wilardson, and so supposed that she had retired to the bunk. It was quite evident that Dunton intended to pass the remaining hours of the night on the floor of the warm cabin. So Praddle went back to the lean-to, laid aside his pack, melted snow in Dunton's kettle and brewed tea, thawed and broiled a venison steak, ate heartily and then slept soundly in Dunton's blankets for several hours.

Praddle awoke before dawn. He blew the ashes from the red heart of the fire and breakfasted on tea and hot steak and toasted bread. He lit his pipe, slung his load and departed. The first icy blink of dawn was lifting when he reached the edge of the great barrens. He halted for a minute to study the landmarks and hitch his pack an inch or two higher, then set out on a straight course for Dogsledge Cove, undaunted by the weary miles of cold and desolation before him. He was square with the big bellowing black devil from up-along —square and more than square, and blood guiltless.

CHAPTER VI

TALK OF FOOLS AND COWARDS

Dunton awoke and remembered the trouble of the night. Mrs. Wilardson had handed her pistol over to him, for safe-keeping, and he felt it now in his pocket. He glanced at the man on the floor beside him and saw that he was asleep. He did not look toward the bunk, but built up the fallen fire, pulled on his coat and moccasins, took up a bucket and opened the door. The sun was showing an edge of white fire in the east and already the wind was rising and puffing. Little swirls of dry snow sprung up and fell and ran as the uncertain wind whipped into the sheltered clearing. The air was gnawing cold. He filled the bucket at the spring after chopping through the night's lid of ice. Upon returning to the cabin, he immediately removed the ropes from Wilardson's legs and arms.

Wilardson opened his eyes, only to close them again instantly. He did not speak. Dunton filled the kettle and began the preparation of breakfast. It was ready when Mrs. Wilardson emerged from the bunk. She crossed the room and stood in front of Dunton and spoke to him. He had to look at her.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

She raised a hand and touched an angry bruise on one cheek lightly with delicate finger tips, but she did not answer the question.

Dunton turned and touched Wilardson with his foot.

"Wake up," he said.

But the big sportsman remained shut-eyed and motionless. His lips were swollen and cracked and one eye was discolored and puffed.

"Wake up, or I'll wake you in a way you won't like!" cried Dunton.

Wilardson moved at that, commenced a realistic yawn but shut it off before it had gone far because of his sore lips, opened one eye and raised himself on an elbow.

"Wilardson, I'll tell you something now that I want you to think about and remember," said Dunton in a cool voice with an edge to it. "If you ever start anything with me again, it will be the last time. One more break from you, and I'll kill you! It seems to me that hanging would be a small price to pay for the pleasure of killing you, you big slobbering coward. That's the way I feel; and I advise you to keep it in mind and behave accordingly until

I get you down to the Post and off my hands."

Wilardson moved his swollen lips without a sound and bowed his head.

"Breakfast is ready," said Dunton.

No one ate much. No one spoke. Dunton went to the door after his second mug of tea and looked out. The rising wind swished a trail of snow past him into the cabin. It hopped on the floor like sand. He shut the door and returned to the table.

"A bad day for a start," he said. "All things considered, I think we had better wait until tomorrow. That wind would cut to the bone, even in the shelter of the river banks."

"You know best," said Wilardson, thickly.

Dunton crossed the clearing to the lean-to after breakfast, with the intention of staying out of the cabin as long as the cold would let him. The lean-to was well sheltered by a hill and heavy brush. He dug in the ashes until he found red coals, threw on twigs and scraps of bark and soon had the fire roaring. He was not anxious about the woman's safety, in spite of the fact that she was now unarmed, for he knew that Wilardson would be afraid to lift his hand to her again so long as they remained in the wilderness. He had broken Wilardson's black spirit last night in a way that would not be soon or easily mended.

Dunton set motionless in the lean-to a long time, draped about with blankets and smoking his pipe. His thoughts were long and unhappy. He saw faces of the past, of men and women, and Mrs. Wilardson's face, with the purpling bruise on the smooth cheek.

"The fool! It is her own fault!" he muttered.

He thought of his recent struggle with Wilardson in the cabin and out on the frozen ground. He wondered that he had not killed the fellow with his hands, and he was thankful that he had not done so. Perhaps he would have choked him to death in cold disgust and fury if the woman had not broken the grip of his fingers. "You would pay for it, and it would not be worth the price," she had whispered in his ear. "It is for me to pay—so let him live!"

"Yes, let her pay!" he muttered, staring into the fire and shivering a little beneath the draped blankets.

He did not shiver with cold, for the long fire filled the shelter with warmth and wavering light. He was sick of heart and soul.

Presently he aroused his mind from its unhappy thoughts and looked about him, reviewing his plans for the journey which he sincerely hoped would commence on the morrow. He saw one pair of snowshoes but not the other. He searched around among blankets and robes, but failed to uncover the missing racquets. Then he looked through such provisions as happened to be in the lean-to, and missed the small tin of tobacco and the packet of tea. He left the shelter and scouted around the edges of the clearing, but the thin, dry snow was blowing and settling continually and he did not find tracks or any other signs of a visitor.

Dunton returned to the cabin at noon. He did not mention the loss of the snowshoes, the tobacco and the tea to his tragic guests, for it was a matter of small importance.

The wind shifted early in the afternoon and the cold moderated. The wind died out as the sun sank and snow began to fall soon afterward.

"Do I have to tie you up again?" asked Dunton, staring the big sportsman straight in the eye.

"I swear there's no need of it," whispered the other, hanging his head. "I was drunk last night. The first drop went to my head. I don't know what I did, or what I was trying to do."

"You hit your wife in the face," said Dunton.

"I was drunk," returned Wilardson. "The rum maddened me."

Dunton looked at the woman.

"Are you afraid of him?" he asked.

"I'm a coward too—at night," she answered in a faint voice, glancing aside.

Dunton smiled bitterly.

"Cowardice is a nasty thing," he said, slowly. "I used to know a man—he was a good deal of a friend of mine—who was the sort of coward you wouldn't understand, Wilardson. He had a platoon in the Second Battle of Ypres, and he didn't turn a hair. He put on some neat raids next winter, opposite Messines—quite desperate little shows, but successful—and we didn't know if he was trying to get killed or decorated. His luck was astonishing. Nothing touched him. He distinguished himself on the Somme, where he commanded a company. But it seems that he was a coward after all."

"If he wasn't a coward, why did he do what he did?" asked Mrs. Wilardson, in a low voice.

"What was that?' returned Dunton.

"What ever caused people to—to think him a coward."

"People? Yes, himself and one other. It was never known in France, nor so much as suspected there. In my opinion, he wasn't a coward, but he was a fool; and the only other person who thought him a coward, or pretended to think so, was the greater fool of the two."

"What did he do?" asked Wilardson, humbly and politely, pretending an interest which he did not feel, his mind on the power and flesh-pots of civilization and the journey that was to commence in the morning.

"He got mixed up with a woman," replied Dunton, staring so fixedly and threateningly that the big fellow regretted having attracted his attention. "He had felt something of the kind before, for other women, but never anything like that. His men became as shadows to him and the war nothing but a beastly muck of danger and dull duty designed for the sole purpose of keeping him away from her and breaking her tender heart with anxiety for him. Her love was a beautiful and wonderful thing, and he firmly believed that if anything should happen to him—any little thing like having his legs or his head blown off—she would die of a broken heart. But he blundered along, and his battalion thought he was ill. The M. O. doctored him for fever and his second-in-command bought him a hot-water bottle. He hoped that he wouldn't be hit—but he didn't show any anxiety. He had some sense left. He was commanding a battalion by this time; and though his heart wasn't in it, he didn't make any mistakes. He carried-on; and in a big show late in 1917 he and his command did a bit of work so fine that he was offered a brigade. And another job was offered him at the same time, a staff-job in England. England! That meant the girl and a wedding and no more dreams of himself lying dead in the mud and her dying of a broken heart. And he deserved a soft job, and love, and a brass hat. He had been in the field three years. He chose the job in England, deserting the men and officers who knew him for the woman who loved him. They were dazed. They had nothing to say. They thought he was ill. But when he told the woman about it—the woman who loved him, the woman for whose peace of mind he had given up four of the best battalions on the Western Front—she called him a coward!"

"She was a fool," said Mrs. Wilardson.

"Yes; and so was your friend, Johnson—if you don't mind me saying so," said Wilardson. "More of a fool than a coward, it seems to me. To a man

like your friend, a fellow who wasn't unnerved by shells and bullets, a brigade would be worth more than any woman in the world, I think. I was never a military man—my business interests made it impossible—and don't know anything about battalions and brigades, but I've known a few women."

Dunton stood up, sneering.

"We'll start for the Post tomorrow, weather permitting," he said. "You'll soon be back with your business interests, Wilardson—if you behave yourself—both of you as safe and snug as if you had never lost your way in a fog. So I think that there is no need of my tying you up tonight. It would be against both your personal and business interests to make another break before you're off my hands. I am as anxious to get you out of this country as you are keen to be gone—both of you."

"Do you care nothing for my safety?" asked the woman.

"You are safe enough, I assure you," returned Dunton.

"Then I'll not sleep in this cabin!" she cried.

"What has become of your pride?" he asked.

She looked at him for a second, then turned away.

"What the devil are you crying about now?" exclaimed Wilardson. "You know you are safe with me! You know that I wasn't myself last night!"

"You are wrong there, Wilardson," said Dunton, turning and smiling dangerously. "You *were* yourself last night! The lady knows you better than I do, poor thing. We shall let her have the cabin to herself tonight, like the considerate and enlightened gentlemen we are, and you shall share my lean-to with me; and, just in case you should imagine during the night that you can get to the mouth of Eskimo River without my help, and decide to dispense with my services, I shall take these ropes along and tie you up as I did last night."

Wilardson's protests availed him nothing.

Dunton awoke early and looked out at the weather. The air was still and not distressingly cold and a foot of new, undrifted snow lay on the ground. A line of lemon-tinted fire spread and widened to the east and south. Above the yellow, the sky was egg-shell green. In the west and north, white stars continued to sparkle. The dawn promised a fine day, but Dunton did not feel any joy at the promise. He freed Wilardson, who continued to sleep heavily, took up his cased rifle and went to the cabin. He was about to knock on the door when a sudden thought caused him to withhold his hand. He saw that the future would be quite difficult enough for the woman without his adding to the difficulties by any thoughtless action. Cursing Wilardson in his heart, he hastened back to the lean-to, tossed a stick on the fire and awoke the big sportsman.

"It is a fine day, and we'll pull out soon after breakfast," he said.

Wilardson sat up.

"Thank God for that!" he exclaimed, in something of his old manner. "I'll be glad to get back to civilization and sanity."

"And lucky," retorted Dunton, turning instantly.

He crossed again to the cabin, setting his feet carefully in the tracks already sunk in the new snow. His scorn and hatred of Wilardson almost choked him at the thought and suggestion that inspired this precaution. Again he hesitated, struggling against a mad impulse to dash back to the lean-to and beat the life out of the fellow—but his hesitation was only for a second.

Mrs. Wilardson opened the door to his knock. He turned on the threshold and shouted to Wilardson to

move lively. Then he entered the cabin and, without a glance at the woman, set about the preparation of breakfast. She helped him, looking at him often with dimmed eyes—but he avoided her questioning, piteous gaze.

CHAPTER VII

THIN ICE

THE sled was laid from end to end with hides, furs and blankets, and among them the firearms were stowed away. More blankets, and provisions for ten days, in a dunnage-bag, were stowed aft and covered with a rubber ground-sheet and roped down. All this left just room enough on the sled for Mrs. Wilardson and the big tarpaulin.

Everything was ready for the start by nine in the morning. Dunton turned the key in the big padlock on the outside of the door.

Mrs. Wilardson refused to be drawn on the sled. Her sprained ankle was almost well. The men pulled on the raw-hide traces and the woman walked behind and steadied the sled now and again over rough places. The snow had drifted here and there between the cabin and the river, but it was so light that even the deeper drifts were easily pulled through. The single pair of snowshoes lay idle on the sled.

Once on the river, the travelers found the way as level and smooth as the surface of a table. Dunton kept close to the right bank, where there was no snow on the ice save that which had fallen during the night. This was not all. He knew Indian Branch and Eskimo River in every season of the year, and the ice and the water under the ice.

Their progress was slow, for Wilardson lacked stamina and had to rest frequently. They came to the head of Potlid Ripple before noon, where several murmuring air-holes gaped and steamed. They crossed the river well above the rapids to safer ice along the southern shore. They rested for an hour at noon, beside a good fire of dry brush.

Mrs. Wilardson's ankle began to give trouble before they had gone far after dinner, and she was forced to take to the sled. The addition to the load caused Wilardson to grumble and grunt and cry halt more frequently than ever. Dunton put up with it for half an hour, ignoring the grumbling and patiently enduring the interruptions to the journey. But only for half an hour. Then he turned suddenly on the grumbler.

"Shut up, confound you!" he cried. "Shut up and back up! Isn't there any manhood in you at all? And what the devil are you grousing about? Haven't you realized yet that you are lucky to be alive?—a dashed sight luckier than you deserve!"

Wilardson shrank back.

"I didn't mean anything," he muttered.

"Then cut out the squealing, for I can't stand much more from you," retorted Dunton, starting forward again on the trace with a jerk that almost yanked Wilardson off his feet.

Dunton built a big fire that night and made a snug shelter with the tarpaulin in a thicket of young spruces. He cooked the evening meal. There was no attempt at conversation. After supper and a smoke, he produced his ropes and bound Wilardson's legs and arms.

"Sorry, but I don't trust you drunk or sober," he said.

There was that in his eyes which silenced the other's protests.

Wilardson lay awake for hours, but it was neither remorse nor discomfort that kept sleep away from him. He was comfortable enough, despite his bonds. As for remorse, he felt not so much as a twinge of it. He had no conscience and he felt no

shame. It was nothing to him that the people between whom he lay despised and detested him. He would soon be himself again, and then he would show them a thing or two. He thought and planned, smiling frequently to himself. He planned the confusion and undoing of this fellow who called himself Johnson. It would be easy—so easy that he wanted to laugh. Johnson was a fool, whoever he was. He would fix him at the mouth of Eskimo River—fix him for a few years, at least. As for his wife?—well, she would realize the error of her ways gradually but painfully, week by week, year by year.

The next day was fine, Wilardson pulled more steadily than before and the Fork was reached soon after sundown. They had made twenty miles that day.

The third day of the journey held fine, but with enough wind to sweep a clean path for them close along the northern shore. It was a southeast wind, and by noon it had blown up a grey haze. They made good progress and Dunton pitched the tarpaulin again soon after sunset.

Dunton did not tie Wilardson that night.

"I'm sick of it," he said. "I'm not afraid of you, and I imagine you have learned a little sense by this time. If not, heaven help you!"

So Wilardson lay unbound that night. He lay awake for an hour, scheming, then slept soundly until morning. He was very sure of himself now. Dunton also slept soundly, though a touch of a finger would have brought him to his feet with open eyes and a clear brain. But the woman lay awake all night, tortured by remorse and shame, sure of nothing but her grief and humiliation.

Snow was falling softly when they awoke. Six inches of it had settled down during the night, moist and heavy. The three set out at the usual time, however. Mrs. Wilardson walked behind in the track dragged by the sled and the men wore the snowshoes turn and turn about. The one without the snowshoes sank to his knees at every step.

"If this had held off, we would have made the Post tonight," said Dunton. "Another trek of twenty miles would have done it."

"One day more or less won't make or break us," returned Wilardson, pleasantly.

The snow continued to fall and the "going" grew heavier every hour. Mrs. Wilardson pushed on the sled. Wilardson pulled steadily, did not grumble once and showed an inclination to be chatty. They rested two hours at noon, and Wilardson ate with evident relish and talked agreeably like one without regrets or misgivings. Dunton wondered at his mood. Mrs. Wilardson paid no attention to his talk but remained deep-sunk in her own thoughts, tortured by memories, numbed by doubts, afraid to consider the future.

During the short, dark afternoon they did not add more than six or seven miles to the morning's march, so heavily did feet and sled drag in the moist snow. The snow-fall thinned at sundown, and by the time camp was made for the night and the big fire was roaring it ceased to the last flake. While supper was cooking a little wind came up, cold and dry, out of the north and west.

Wilardson had to watch himself now, and consider every word before he spoke it, to guard against a premature display of his old manner—for he was feeling his old self again. With the Post so near, he felt very sure of himself. The Post at the mouth of the river was the advanced stronghold of that particular side of civilization—the material side of it—in which lay his power. He had impressed Mr. Hill, the Factor, with his power on the way in. Again he lay

awake in his warm blankets between the woman who was his wife and the man who had saved him from the fog on the barrens, and schemed for their ruin. They knew him and despised him, these two. Very well! They would find him more dangerous than they imagined!

It seemed to Wilardson that it would be wise for him to obtain a private interview with Mr. Hill before the Factor could hear anything of what Johnson had to say. He had Johnson cold, 'tis true!—the theft of the thousand dollars from his pocket was weapon enough with which to square accounts with Johnson—and yet he shrank from the thought of laying the charge before Johnson's face. The fellow had the courage and ferocity of a devil and the speed of lightning, and there was no saying what he might do before Hill could interfere. And there was no knowing what the woman might say or do.

It became clear to Wilardson that he must reach the Post and the ear of the Factor an hour or two ahead of his companions—an hour or two, at least—to avoid unpleasant complications. And this thought suggested another, a greater. It was an inspiration, this new idea. It was aimed at the woman, his wife—his wife who knew him and despised him.

As soon as he believed the others to be sound asleep, Wilardson slipped from his blankets, cautiously pulled on his moccasins and outer coat, lifted the snowshoes and stole away. He had less than seven miles to go, and the river was his road. He would reach the Post and explain the situation to the Factor before midnight; and his wife and this fellow who called himself Johnson, the woman and man who despised him, would turn up in the morning. It was a rich thought.

The night was colder than the day had been, but nothing to dismay a well-clothed, well-fed man. The wind fell upon the wide surface of the river irregularly, puffing up the drying snow, whirling it aloft in clouds, driving it in columns, twisting it in wisps, dropping it and lifting it again.

Mrs. Wilardson had not been asleep. She had seen her husband's preparations for departure and furtive exit from the shelter through drooped, deceptive lashes. Knowing nothing about the loss of the money from his pocket, she guessed at only a part of the truth—at the part of his scheme designed against her. But she did not move or cry out. She was content to let him go, to let things take their course. She did not care. She was unafraid. She had hurt herself so grieviously that she knew that Wilardson and the world could not do anything to hurt her more. So she made no effort to recall him or to arouse Dunton.

Wilardson had not been gone more than fifteen minutes when Dunton suddenly awoke and sat up, warned of danger by a sense that had been developed by nights of peril far to the eastward of Eskimo River. He glanced at the empty blankets beside him, then instantly at the corner of the shelter where he had stood the snowshoes. He slipped from the shelter without a word, threw wood and dry brush on the fire, drew on coat and moccasins and went out beyond the wavering edge of the fire-shine. Stopping, he made out the webbed tracks, some clear-cut and perfect, others half erased by the drift. He followed the trail for twenty yards or so, sometimes sinking thigh-deep, sometimes no deeper than his ankle; and then the tracks vanished. The snow had filled them. He scouted ahead and soon picked them up again. One glance at them, and one back at the fire and at the surrounding gloom of darkness and fleeting wraiths of whiteness, and he knew that Wilardson had swung away from the shore toward mid-river.

He made what speed he could back to the shelter and found Mrs. Wilardson awake and on her feet. He unfastend the load from the sled and tossed it aside, guns and furs and all.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Don't you see that your husband has given me the slip?" he returned.

"What of it? He cannot do you any harm," she answered.

"The fool is heading for the middle of the river!" he exclaimed. "Thin ice and swift water and air-holes!"

"Let him go!" she cried. "Let him go!"

For a few seconds he stood as motionless as if frozen, staring at her in silence through the wavering shine of the fire. Then, without a word, he stooped and piled his entire supply of cut fuel onto the fire, stooped again and placed an armful of blankets on the sled, laid hold of the raw-hide traces and pulled out into the dark.

Mrs. Wilardson followed Dunton, plunging and stumbling at the tail of the sled. He halted frequently to examine the snow, but did not once look around at her. Here and there the tracks were hidden for ten or fifteen yards together. Sometimes they were forced to pause and bow their heads for half a minute at a time to let the choking drift spin over them.

A piercing shriek rang from the gloom ahead. Dunton stood harkening, hearing only the dry whisper of running snow and a duller, heavier sound throbbing beyond it. Seconds passed; and then the shriek was followed and confirmed by terrific, despairing yells.

Dunton moved toward the outcry, dragging the sled. The yells continued, but in spite of them the heavy throbbing grew louder on the air. He knew it for the voice of the rapids thundering under thin ice and sobbing for breath at roaring air-holes. He advanced cautiously and shouted in reply to the bellows of terror. Presently he drew the sled up, turned it and pushed it along in front of him. He cautioned Mrs. Wilardson to keep back a little.

Wilardson was at the lower edge of an air-hole. His feet were wedged against a huge rock, and that was the only thing that saved him from being swept down under the ice. He clung to the edge of the ice with arms and chin. His yells were growing faint by the time the tail of the sled touched his hands. He laid hold of it, first with one hand, then with both, then hooked his elbows in it. He kicked away from the rock with what little strength was left in his numbed legs. One snowshoe was torn away by the dragging water, and that helped him. He kicked again, lurched upward and got his chest on the edge of the ice.

"Pull!" he screamed.

Dunton and the woman pulled on the sled, slowly, steadily, with all their weight. Wilardson struggled, wriggled. His arms felt as if they were being dragged from their sockets. The hungry water tore at his battling legs as if they would strip him from the waist down: But, inch by inch, working with every muscle of every part of him and clinging to the strong sled with arms and chin, he came up and forward over the edge of the ice.

They dragged him clear of the air-hole; and when Dunton stooped above him he found him unconscious, though the great arms still clung to the sled. He broke the grip of fingers and elbows, rolled the body in blankets and lifted it onto the sled. On the way back to the shelter and the fire, Mrs. Wilardson pulled beside Dunton on the raw-hide traces. It was hard pulling, and the wind was rising. Sometimes they crouched side by side, close together, to let the suffocating flurries of snow go over, but neither spoke a word to the other.

Wilardson slept heavily for the remaining hours of the night, heaped

about with warm blankets; and in the morning he seemed no worse physically for his fright and immersion, though considerably dashed in spirits. He made no attempt to explain the situation from which he had been rescued, and no questions were asked.

The wind blew all day, so the three remained in camp and Wilardson kept to his blankets. Dunton spent most of the day in the heavy woods behind and below the camp, chopping fuel for the fire.

The next day dawned clear and windless. The journey was resumed after an early breakfast, with Wilardson lying in state on the sled, and concluded before noon. Big dogs raced down upon them silently and circled around them. An old squaw looked out at them from her cabin, then ran to the house with the news. Mr. Hill and the store-keeper came out and advanced cordially to meet them.

"Glad to see you alive and safe, Mrs. Wilardson!" exclaimed the Factor, approaching in his best manner. "I've been looking out for you for weeks. What, Colonel, is that you? This is an unexpected pleasure."

Wilardson rolled off the sled, kicked himself free from robes and blankets and ran forward to the Factor.

"What did you call that fellow?" he asked in a thrilling whisper. "Did you say Colonel? Who the devil is he?"

He laid a heavy hand on Mr. Hill's shoulder and shook him.

"My dear sir!" protested Hill. "I said Colonel, of course! He is Colonel Dunton, Philip Dunton—highly respectable—distinguished, in fact—though somewhat eccentric."

"Eccentric!" cried Wilardson. "He's a thief, I tell you!—and you are a fool! He robbed me of eight hundred dollars!"

"You are mad, Mr. Wilardson!" retorted the Factor. "I made enquiries about him two years ago. He wouldn't take your money even if he needed it. Really, sir, I don't know what to make of you! You forget yourself. You must be crazy! And may I ask what you have done with your guides?"

This last was too much for the rich sportsman. To be questioned by this little whipper-snapper of a trader about the two worthless fellows who had deserted him and stolen his canoe, in an accusing tone of voice, as if he had eaten them and would have to pay for them—this filled his cup to overflowing with the blind wine of wrath. He glared madly for a few seconds, then gave full vent to his emotions. He damned Mr. Hill, and the guides, and someone called Johnson, and the thief who had picked his pocket, and all the colonels who had survived the late war.

"He had a nasty accident a couple of nights ago," said Dunton to the Factor. "He broke through the ice at First Rattle, and Mrs. Wilardson and I had all we could do to get him out. We must put him to bed immediately."

Dunton and Hill and the sturdy store-keeper put Mr. Wilardson to bed, and they found it just about all they could do. They were forced to throw him. They had to handle him roughly—but it was all for his own good.

CHAPTER VIII

BATTLE HARBOR

Dunton hired Micmac White and Micmac's five big dogs, loaded his sled, purchased and tied on new snowshoes and set out on his return trip to Indian Branch within twenty hours of his spectacular arrival at the Post. Before leaving, he described to Hill the outstanding incidents of his intercourse with Mr. Norman Wilardson and asked him, as one friend of another, to do all in his power for Mrs. Wilardson. But,

despite his solicitude, he went without saying good-bye to the lady.

The weather was fine, but the going was heavy. Dunton and Micmac White took turns at breaking trail for the dogs. The cabin on Indian Branch was reached without accident, in the course of time. Men and dogs rested two days and nights.

"I've had enough of this," Dunton said to Micmac White, one morning at breakfast. "It's a good sporting country, but it is becoming a trifle too popular to suit me. I think I'll give the interior of Brazil a try-out."

"You head back for de Post today, what?" returned the 'breed.

"Yes, that's the idea. Today as well as tomorrow."

"Dat Mis' Wilardson headed for Brazil, hey?"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"Dat a' right, Colonel. But Micmac see grand wid two eyes, you bet! Why don't you lose dat poor squid when you got 'im 'way up on dis here Injun Branch, hey? Dat Mis' Wilardson don't mind. She like you grand. She die wid dat odder feller. I see her at de winder when we pull out."

"Silence, White! You don't know what you are saying! You are a fool! Shut up!"

"Nope, Micmac White ain't no fool. Nor Colonel Dunton ain't no fool, neither. Dat a'right, sir. We make de Post in t'ree days, easy."

Dunton filled a dunnage-bag and his Wolsley-kit with his books, papers and odds-and-ends and rearranged the load on the sled.

Mr. Hill was astonished at Dunton's reappearance so soon, for his eyes were not so observant, nor his heart so understanding, as the eyes and heart of Micmac White. But he liked Dunton and admired eccentric gentlemen who could afford to be that way; so he hid his astonishment as well as he could behind the cordiality of his welcome.

Dinner at the Post that night was a thing to remember. The Factor and the store-keeper are still talking about it. The cook and her helpers were warned of it at noon, and Micmac White volunteered to bear a hand in the kitchen. The cook possessed a cook-book which she could not read—but the imaginative and enthusiastic half-breed spelled it out for her, and the keys of cellar and store-house were theirs. Mr. Hill and Mr. McFee wore black coats. Dunton donned a service-jacket with ribbons on the left breast, for lack of anything more suitable. The dishes from the kitchen were served as they were ready, or as they came to hand, without regard to precedent, and every dusty bin in the cellar was ravished of at least one historic bottle.

A number of strange dishes had been tasted, a brace of roast grouse had been wrecked and the bottles had made several rounds before Mr. Hill spoke of the subject which had been uppermost in his mind ever since Dunton's arrival before noon. He spoke of the Wilardsons; and this was the first mention of them in Dunton's presence.

"We got the Wilardsons away three days ago, in a fore-and-after for the hospital at Battle Harbor," he said. "He is a very sick man in my opinion—and quite off his chump. I sent a squaw along with them as far as Battle Harbor, just to make things more comfortable for the lady. Have you known him long, Colonel?"

"Never set eyes on him before he came floundering and yelling to my fire out of the fog," returned Dunton.

"Well, I pity that charming woman! She married him for his money, I suppose. He is rotten with it, I hear."

"Very likely," replied Dunton. "He is a type of man who does not interest me in the least. McFee, I'll trouble you to push the Scotch across."

So the subject was dropped for an hour. Dunton told queer tales of trench and billet and disputed barricade, now tenderly, again in a vein of grim humor. McFee talked of the Glasgow of his youth. Hill talked of London, and music halls, and attempted a sentimental song. A bottle of port appeared, sealed with green wax.

"That's Archie McTavish stuff," said Hill, chipping the wax with a knife. "He laid ten dozens of it when he was Factor here. Fine old boy! He died in Paris fifty years ago."

The port warmed McFee to personalities.

"Colonel, I admire ye," he said "An uncle of me mother's was a soldier an' fought at Waterloo, an' me own father was a scholar. Ye're both, man, an' I honour ye for it. Factor, me lad, we'll drink a health to the Colonel an' another to the soul o' Archie McTavish an' to the devil with orthodoxy!"

The toasts were drunk with enthusiasm.

"And here's another, two more, for the three of us!" cried Mr. Hill. "Here's joy to all beautiful ladies—especially and particularly to them with blue eyes—and confusion to their rich and bullyin' and bleatin' husbands."

"Very delicately expressed, sir!" exclaimed McFee.

Dunton emptied his glass, but his face was expressionless.

Dunton breakfasted alone next morning. His hosts arose painfully two hours later, just in time to see him off in Peter Dormer's skiff for Dog-sledge Cove.

Dunton went ashore at Dog-sledge Cove, where he was known and highly thought of, and learned that Bill Praddle and Nick Dugan and their families had dug up a pot of gold on the landwash and sailed away for Newfoundland.

Dunton paid off Peter Dormer and the skiff and engaged a larger craft and a crew of two for the next stage of his coastwise journey. He reached Battle Harbor without accident. He and Dr. Scanlon of the Sea Mission Hospital had met only once before, but he had read and heard of Scanlon and his great work on the Labrador, and the doctor had heard a good deal about the eccentric gentleman on Indian Branch. The last word which the doctor had heard of Dunton had been from Mrs. Wilardson.

"I wish you had arrived two days ago," said Scanlon. "The mail-boat put in here for the last time this season, headed south. I think you were expected. A friend of yours sailed with her, in most unhappy circumstances. It is most unfortunate that you did not get here two days ago."

"I suppose you refer to the Wilardsons," returned Dunton. "They were only a few days ahead of me, I know—but I cannot imagine why they should expect me to overtake them, as I had no intention of coming out when I last saw them. I ran across them up on Indian Branch, and if they are unhappy—well, honestly, Doctor, I don't quite see that it is any business of mine."

"She spoke of you as a friend, Colonel Dunton—and she was in need of a friend, poor thing!"

Dunton lost color.

"What has happened now?" he demanded. "What has that rotter been up to now?"

Dr. Scanlon stared.

"Rotter?" he queried. "I don't follow you."

"I am referring to that skunk Wilardson, as you know!" cried the other. "Get it off your chest, for heaven's sake!"

"Mr. Wilardson died of pneumonia within a day of his arrival," replied Scanlon, stiffly, "and the widow went south with the body day before yesterday."

The color came back to Dunton's

face and the expression of his dark eyes changed.

"Did you say he died?" he whispered. "Wilardson dead?"

"He died in this house," said the Doctor, gazing searchingly, curiously, into his visitor's face.

"Thank God!" cried Dunton; and then he leaned back in his chair and began to tremble. His hands and the muscles of his face twitched. He laughed, then groaned.

"Nothing new—or serious," he said, jerkingly. "Touch of fever. Felt it coming for days. Terrible depression—then this. Used to hit me often—but not more than once in—three months now."

Dr. Scanlon got busy; and Dunton found quinine pills on his tongue and whiskey washing it down his throat; and the chair moved nearer to the stove as if its own volition; and blankets draped themselves about his shoulders. A dusky orderly appeared, knelt and pulled off his moccasins and stockings and set his feet firmly into a big pan of very hot water redolent of mustard. Sensations of pleasant vagueness and delicious irresponsibility crept slowly over him. He dozed. He slept.

When Dunton awoke, he found himself in a bed, between sheets, with a hot-water bottle at his feet. A shaded lamp stood on a little table beside him, and Dr. Scanlon sat nearby smoking a cigarette.

"That's all of that," said Dunton. "I'm fit as a fiddle again."

"You'll be fitter when I'm done with you," returned the Doctor.

Dunton was silent for a half minute, while Scanlon continued to observe him with an air that was at once human and professional.

"Did you say something about someone dying, or did I dream it?" he asked.

"I told you that Wilardson died here a few days ago," answered the Doctor. He paused for a second or two. "The lady left a letter with me, for you," he continued. "It slipped my mind at the moment of your arrival; and I'm not sure that I should give it to you now, with your temperature still a degree above normal. I wouldn't if I were nothing but a doctor. Here it is."

He produced an envelope from an inner pocket and handed it to Dunton.

Dunton opened the envelope slowly and read the enclosure with half-closed eyes and an expressionless face. This is what he read:

Your pride was as much to blame as mine. But I admit mine—and am ashamed of it. Why did you go away, when you knew in your heart that I did not mean a word of the mad thing I said? I called you a coward because you thought of and treated me as a coward. I was jealous for your honor—as jealous for it as the men of your regiment were—and I never doubted your courage any more than they doubted it. What cause had I ever given you to believe me a coward?—afraid for either you or myself? My faith in you was as great as my love for you; and neither have ever wavered. But you, in your madness, let me ruin my life with my mad pride—without a question, without turning once and looking through my eyes into my heart for the truth which you knew to be there.

Dunton folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Eight-thirty," answered Scanlon.

"Night?"

"Night, of course."

"Is there a schooner in the harbor?"

"Yes, there are two fore-and-afters."

"Please charter one for me, Doctor—the fastest—to be ready to sail south tomorrow morning."

"But your fever, Colonel!"

"Forget it!" exclaimed Dunton, smiling. "What is a touch of fever to a man who has been dead for years? I start for Montreal tomorrow! For Montreal, my boy! For life! To pick up life where I lost it years ago!"

"It sounds good to me," said the Doctor. "We'll have a drink on it."

Where Angels Fear to Tread

By Morgan Robertson

"I Have Seen Wicked Men and Fools, a Great Many of Each;
and I Believe They Both Get Paid in the End,
But the Fools First"

(*Complete Sea Action Novel*)

THE first man to climb the *Almeda's* side-ladder from the tug was the shipping-master, and after him came the crew he had shipped. They clustered at the rail, looking around and aloft with muttered profane comments, one to the other, while the shipping-master approached a gray-eyed giant who stood with a shorter but broader man at the poop-deck steps.

"Mr. Jackson—the mate here, I s'pose?" inquired the shipping-master. A nod answered him. "I've brought you a good crew," he continued; "well just tally 'em off, and then you can sign my receipt. The captain'll be down with the pilot this afternoon."

"I'm the mate—yes," said the giant; "but what dry-goods store did you raid for that crowd? Did the captain pick 'em out?"

"A delegation o' parsons," muttered the short, broad man, contemptuously.

"No, they're not parsons," said the shipping-master, as he turned to the man, the slightest trace of a smile on his seamy face. "You're Mr. Becker, the second mate, I take it; you'll find 'em all right, sir. They're sailors, and good ones, too. No, Mr. Jackson, the skipper didn't pick em—just asked me for sixteen good men, and there you are. Muster up to the capstan here, boys," he called, "and be counted."

As they grouped themselves amidships with their clothes-bags, the shipping-master beckoned the chief mate over to the rail.

"You see, Mr. Jackson," he said with a backward glance at the men, "I've only played the regular dodge on 'em. They've all got the sailor's bug in their heads and want to go coasting; so I told 'em this was a coaster."

"So she is," answered the officer; "round the Horn to Callao is coasting. What more do they want?"

"Yes, but I said nothin' of Callao, and they were all three sheets i' the wind when they signed, so they didn't notice the articles. They expected a schooner, too, big enough for sixteen men; but I've just talked 'em out of that notion. They think, too, that they'll have a week in port to see if they like the craft; and to make 'em think it was easy to quit, I told 'em to sign nicknames—made 'em believe that a wrong name on the articles voided the contract."

"But it don't. They're here, and they'll stay—that is, if they know enough to man the windlass."

"Of course—of course. I'm just givin' you a pointer. You may have to run them a little at the start, but that's easy. Now we'll tally 'em off. Don't

mind the names; they'll answer to 'em. You see, they're all townies, and bring their names from home."

The shipping-master drew a large paper from his pocket, and they approached the men at the capstan, where the short, broad second mate had been taking their individual measures with scowling eye.

It was a strange crew for the forecastle of an outward-bound, deep-water American ship. Mr. Jackson looked in vain for the heavy, foreign faces, the greasy canvas jackets and blanket trousers he was accustomed to see. Not that these men seemed to be landsmen—each carried in his face and bearing the indefinable something by which sailors of all races may distinguish each other at a glance from fishermen, tugmen, and deck-hands. They were all young men, and their intelligent faces—blemished more or less with marks of overnight dissipation—were as sunburnt as were those of the two mates; and where a hand could be seen, it showed as brown and tarry as that of the ablest able seaman. There were no chests among them, but the canvas clothes-bags were the genuine article, and they shouldered and handled them as only sailors can. Yet, aside from these externals, they gave no sign of being anything but well-paid, well-fed, self-respecting citizens, who would read the papers, discuss politics, raise families, and drink more than is good on pay-nights, to repent at church in the morning. The hands among them that were hidden were covered with well-fitting gloves—kid or dogskin; all wore white shirts and fashionable neckwear; their shoes were polished; their hats were in style; and here and there, where an unbuttoned, silk-faced overcoat exposed the garments beneath, could be seen a gold watch-chain with tasteful charm.

"Now, boys," said the shipping-master, cheerily, as he unfolded the articles on the capstan-head, "answer, and step over to starboard as I read your names. Ready? Tosser Galvin."

"Here." A man carried his bag across the deck a short distance.

"Bigpig Monahan." Another—as large a man as the mate—answered and followed.

"Moccasey Gill."

"Good God!" muttered the mate, as this man responded.

"Sinful Peck." An undersized man, with a cultivated blond mustache, lifted his hat politely to Mr. Jackson, disclosing a smooth, bald head, and passed over, smiling sweetly. Whatever his character, his name belied his appearance; for his face was cherubic in its innocence.

"Say," interrupted the mate, angrily, "what kind of a game is this, anyhow? Are these men sailors?"

"Yes, yes," answered the shipping-master, hurriedly; "you'll find 'em all right. And, Sinful," he added, as he frowned reprovingly at the last man named, "don't you get gay till my receipt's signed and I'm clear of you."

Mr. Jackson wondered, but subsided; and, each name bringing forth a response, the reader called off: "Seldom Helward, Shiner O'Toole, Senator Sands, Jump Black, Yampaw Gallagher, Sorry Welch, Yorker Jimson, General Lannigan, Turkey Twain, Gunner Meagher, Ghost O'Brien, and Poop-deck Cahill."

Then the astounded Mr. Jackson broke forth profanely. "I've been shipmates," he declared between oaths, "with freak names of all nations; but this gang beats me. Say, you," he called —"you with the cro'-jack eye there,—what's that name you go by? Who are you?" He spoke to the large man who had answered to "Bigpig Monahan," and who suffered from a slight distortion of one eye; but the man, instead of civilly repeating his name, answered curtly and coolly:

"I'm the man that struck Billy Patterson."

Fully realizing that the mate who hesitates is lost, and earnestly resolved to rebuke this man as his insolence re-

" . . . and shot the man, who fell with a groan"

quired, Mr. Jackson had secured a belaying-pin and almost reached him, when he found himself looking into the bore of a pistol held by the shipping-master.

"Now, stop this," said the latter firmly; "stop it right here, Mr. Jackson. These men are under my care till you've signed my receipt. After that you can do as you like; but if you touch one of them before you sign, I'll have you up 'fore the commissioner. And you fellers," he said over his shoulder, "you keep still and be civil till I'm rid of you. I've used you well, got your berths, and charged you nothin'. All I wanted was to get Cappen Benson the right kind of a crew."

"Let's see that receipt," snarled the mate. "Put that gun up, too, or I'll show you one of my own. I'll tend to your good men when you get ashore." He glared at the quiescent Bigpig, and followed the shipping-master—who still held his pistol ready, however—over to the rail, where the receipt was produced and signed.

"Away you go, now," said the mate; "you and your gun. Get over the side."

The shipping-master did not answer until he had scrambled down to the waiting tug and around to the far side of her deck-house. There, ready to dodge, he looked up at the mate with a triumphant grin on his shrewd face, and called:

"Say, Mr. Jackson, 'member the old bark *Fair Wind* ten years ago, and the ordinary seaman you triced up and skinned alive with a deck-scraper? D' you remember, curse you? 'Member breakin' the same boy's arm with a heaver? You do, don't you? I'm him. 'Member me sayin' I'd get square?"

He stepped back to avoid the whirling belaying-pin sent by the mate, which, rebounding, only smashed a window in the pilot-house. Then, amid an exchange of blasphemous disapproval between Mr. Jackson and the tug captain, and derisive jeers from the shipping-master,—who also averred that Mr. Jackson ought to be shot, but was not worth hanging for,—the tug gathered in her lines and steamed away.

CHAPTER II

"YOU TALK LIKE A P'LICEMAN"

WRATHFUL of soul, Mr. Jackson turned to the men on the deck. They had

changed their position; they were now close to the fire-rail at the mainmast, surrounding Bigpig Monahan (for by their names we must know them), who, with an injured expression of face, was shedding outer garments and voicing his opinion of Mr. Jackson, which the others answered by nods and encouraging words. He had dropped a pair of starched cuffs over a belaying-pin, and was rolling up his shirt-sleeve, showing an arm as large as a small man's leg, and the mate was just about to interrupt the discourse, when the second mate called his name. Turning, he beheld him beckoning violently from the cabin companionway, and joined him.

"Got your gun, Mr. Jackson?" asked the second officer, anxiously, as he drew him within the door. "I started for mine when the shippin'-master pulled. I can't make that crowd out; but they're lookin' for fight, that's plain. When you were at the rail they were sayin': 'Soak him, Bigpig.' 'Paste him, Bigpig.' 'Put a head on him.' They might be a lot o' prize-fighters."

Mr. Becker was not afraid; his position and duties forbade it. He was simply human, and confronted with a new problem.

"Don't care a rap what they are," answered the mate, who was sufficiently warmed up to welcome any problem. "They'll get fight enough. We'll overhaul their dunnage first for whisky and knives, then turn them to. Come on—I'm heeled."

They stepped out and advanced to the capstan amidships, each with a hand in his trousers pocket.

"Pile those bags against the capstan here, and go forrard," ordered the mate, in his most officer-like tone.

"Go to the devil," they answered. "What for?—they're our bags, not yours. Who in Sam Hill are you, anyhow? What are you? You talk like a p'liceman."

Before this irreverence could be replied to Bigpig Monahan advanced.

"Look here, old horse," he said; "I don't know whether you're captain or mate, or owner or cook; and I don't care, either. You had somethin' to say 'bout my eyes just now. Nature made my eyes, and I can't help how they look; but I don't allow any big bullheads to make remarks 'bout 'em. You're spoilin' for somethin'. Put up your hands." He threw himself into an aggressive attitude, one mighty fist within six inches of Mr. Jackson's face.

"Go forrard," roared the officer, his gray eyes sparkling; "forrard, all o' you!"

"We'll settle this; then we'll go forrard. There'll be fair play; these men'll see to that. You'll only have me to handle. Put up."

Mr. Jackson did not "put up." He repeated again his order to go forward and was struck on the nose—not a hard blow; just a preliminary tap, which started blood. He immediately drew his pistol and shot the man, who fell with a groan.

An expression of shock and horror overspread every face among the crew, and they surged back, away from that murderous pistol. A momentary hesitance followed, then horror gave way to furious rage, and carnage began. Coats and vests were flung off, belaying-pins and capstan-bars seized; inarticulate, half-uttered imprecations punctuated by pistol reports drowned the storm of abuse with which the mates justified the shot, and two distinct bands of men swayed and zigzagged about the deck, the center of each an officer fighting according to his lights—shooting as he could between blows of fists and clubs. Then the smoke of battle thinned and two men with sore heads and bleeding faces retreated painfully and hurriedly to the cabin, followed by snarling maledictions and threats.

It was hardly a victory for either side. The pistols were empty and the fight taken out of the mates for a time; and on the deck lay three moaning men, while two others clung to the fire-rail, draining blood from limp, hanging

arms. But eleven sound and angry men were left—and the officers had more ammunition. They entered their rooms, mopped their faces with wet towels, reloaded the firearms, pocketed the remaining cartridges, and returned to the deck, the mate carrying a small ensign.

"We'll run it up to the main, Becker," he said thickly, — for he suffered, — ignoring in his excitement the etiquette of the quarter-deck.

"Aye, aye," said the other, equally unmindful of his breeding. "Will we go for 'em again?" The problem had defined itself to Mr. Becker. These men would fight, but not shoot.

"No, no," answered the mate; "not unless they go for us and it's self-defense. They're not sailors—they won't know where they are. We don't want to get into trouble. Sailors don't act that way. We'll wait for the captain or the police." Which, interpreted, and plus the slight shade of anxiety showing in his disfigured face, meant that Mr. Jackson was confronted with a new phase of the problem: as to how much more unsafe it might be to shoot down, on the deck of a ship, men who did not know where they were, than to shoot down sailors who did. So, while the uninjured men were assisting the wounded five into the forecastle, the police flag was run up to the main truck, and the two mates retired to the poop to wait and watch.

In a few moments the eleven men came aft in a body, empty-handed, however, and evidently with no present hostile intention: they had merely come for their clothes. But that dunnage had not been searched; and in it might be all sorts of dangerous weapons and equally dangerous whisky, the possession of which could bring an unpleasant solution to the problem. So Mr. Jackson and Mr. Becker leveled their pistols over the poop-rail, and, the chief mate roared: "Let those things alone—let 'em alone, or we'll drop some more o' you."

The men halted, hesitated, and sullenly returned to the forecastle.

"Guess they've had enough," said Mr. Becker, jubilantly.

"Don't fool yourself. They're not used to blood-letting, that's all. If it wasn't for my wife and the kids I'd lower the dinghy and jump her; and it isn't them I'd run from, either. As it is, I've half a mind to haul down the flag, and let the old man settle it. Steward," he called to a mild-faced man who had been flitting from galley to cabin, unmindful of the disturbance, "go forrard and find out how bad those fellows are hurt. Don't say I sent you, though."

The steward obeyed, and returned with the information that two men had broken arms, two flesh-wounds in the legs, and one—the big man—suffered from a ragged hole through the shoulder. All were stretched out in bedless bunks, unwilling to move. He had been asked numerous questions by the others—as to where the ship was bound, who the men were who had shot them, why there was no bedding in the forecastle, the captain's whereabouts, and the possibility of getting ashore to swear out warrants. He had also been asked for bandages and hot water which he requested permission to supply, as the wounded men were suffering greatly. This permission was refused, and the slight—very slight—nautical flavor to the queries, and the hopeful condition of the stricken ones, decided Mr. Jackson to leave the police flag at the masthead.

When dinner was served in the cabin, and Mr. Jackson sat down before a savory roast, leaving Mr. Becker on deck to watch, the steward imparted the additional information that the men forward expected to eat in the cabin.

"Hang it!" he mused; "they can't be sailormen."

Then Mr. Becker reached his head down the skylight, and said: "Raisin' the devil with the cook, sir—dragged him out o' the galley into the forecastle."

"Are they coming aft?"

"No, sir."

"All right. Watch out."

The mate went on eating, and the steward hurried forward to learn the fate of his assistant. He did not return until Mr. Jackson was about to leave the cabin. Then he came, with a wry face and disgust in his soul, complaining that he had been seized, hustled into the forecastle, and compelled, with the Chinese cook, to eat of the salt beef and pea-soup prepared for the men, which lay untouched by them. In spite of his aches and trouble of mind, Mr. Jackson was moved to a feeble grin.

"Takes a sailor or a hog to eat it, hey, Steward?" he said.

He relieved Mr. Becker, who ate his dinner hurriedly, as became a good second mate, and the two resumed their watch on the poop, noticing that the cook was jabbering Chinese protest in the galley, and that the men had climbed to the topgallant-forecastle—also watching, and occasionally waving futile signals to passing tugs or small sailing-craft. They, too, might have welcomed the police boat.

But, either because the *Almena* lay too far over on the Jersey flats for the flag to be noticed, or because harbor police share the fallibility of their shore brethren in being elsewhere when wanted, no shiny black steamer with blue-coated guard appeared to investigate the trouble, and it was well on toward three o'clock before a tug left the beaten track to the eastward and steamed over to the ship. The officers took her lines as she came alongside, and two men climbed the side-ladder—one, a Sandy Hook pilot, who need not be described; the other, the captain of the ship.

Captain Benson, in manner and appearance, was as superior to the smooth-shaven and manly-looking Mr. Jackson as the latter was to the misformed, hairy, and brutal second mate. With his fashionably cut clothing, steady blue eye, and refined features, he could have been taken for an easy-going club-man or educated army officer rather than the master of a working-craft. Yet there was no lack of seamanly decision in the leap he made from the rail to the deck, or in the tone of his voice as he demanded:

"What's the police flag up for, Mr. Jackson?"

"Mutiny, sir. They started in to lick me 'fore turning to, and we've shot five, but none of them fatally."

"Lower that flag at once."

Mr. Becker obeyed this order, and as the flag fluttered down the captain received an account of the crew's misdoing from the mate. He stepped into his cabin, and returning with a double-barreled shot-gun, leaned it against the booby-hatch, and said quietly: "Call all hands aft who can come."

Mr. Jackson delivered the order in a roar, and the eleven men forward, who had been watching the newcomers from the forecastle, straggled aft and clustered near the capstan, all of them hatless and coatless, shivering palpably in the keen December air. With no flinching of their eyes, they stared at Captain Benson and the pilot.

CHAPTER III

SINFUL PECK

"Now, men," said the Captain, "what's this trouble about? What's the matter?"

"Are you the captain here?" asked a red-haired, Roman-nosed man, as he stepped out of the group. "There's matter enough. We ship for a run down to Rio Janeiro and back in a big schooner; and here we're put aboard a square-rigged craft, that we don't know anything about, bound for Callao, and 'fore we're here ten minutes we're howled at and shot. Bigpig Monahan thinks he's goin' to die; he's bleedin'—they're all bleedin', like stuck pigs. Sorry Welch and Turkey Twain ha' got broken arms, and Jump Black and Ghost O'Brien got it in the legs and can't stand up. What kind o' work is this, anyhow?"

"That's perfectly right. You were shot for assaulting my officers. Do you call yourselves able seamen, and say you know nothing about square-rigged craft?"

"We're able seamen on the Lakes. We can get along in schooners. That's what we came down for."

Capain Benson's lips puckered, and he whistled softly. "The Lakes," he said—"lake sailors. What part of the Lakes?"

"Oswego. We're all union men."

The captain took a turn or two along the deck, then faced them, and said: "Men, I've been fooled as well as you. I would not have an Oswego sailor aboard my ship—much less a whole crew of them. You may know your work up there, but are almost useless here until you learn. Although I paid five dollars a man for you, I'd put you ashore and ship a new crew were it not for the fact that five wounded men going out of this ship requires explanations, which would delay my sailing and incur expense to my owners. However, I give you the choice—to go to sea, and learn your work under the mates, or go to jail as mutineers; for to protect my officers I must prosecute you all."

"S'pose we do neither?"

"You will probably be shot—to the last resisting man—either by us or the harbor police. You are up against the law."

They looked at each other with varying expressions on their faces; then one asked: "What about the bunks in the forecastle? There's no bedding."

"If you failed to bring your own, you will sleep on the bunk-boards without it."

"And that swill the Chinaman cooked at dinner time—what about that?"

"You will get the allowance of provisions provided by law—no more. And you will eat it in the forecastle. Also, if you have neglected to bring pots, pans, and spoons, you will very likely eat it with your fingers. This is not a lake vessel, where sailors eat at the cabin table, with knives and forks. Decide this matter quickly."

The captain began pacing the deck, and the listening pilot stepped forward, and said kindly: "Take my advice, boys, and go along. You're in for it, if you don't."

They thanked him with their eyes for the sympathy, conferred together for a few moments, then their spokesman called out: "We'll leave it to the fellers forrard, captain"; and forward they trooped. In five minutes they were back, with resolution in their faces.

"We'll go, captain," their leader said. "Bigpig can't be moved 'thout killin' him, and says if he lives he'll follow your mate to hell but he'll pay him back; and the others talk the same; and we'll stand by em—we'll square up this day's work."

Captain Benson brought his walk to a stop close to the shotgun. "Very well, that is your declaration," he said, his voice dropping the conversational tone he had assumed, and taking on one more in accordance with his position; "now I will deliver mine. We sail at once for Callao and back to an American port of discharge. You know your wages—fourteen dollars a month. I am master of this ship, responsible to my owners and the law for the lives of all on board. And this responsibility includes the right to take the life of a mutineer. You have been such, but I waive the charge considering your ignorance of salt-water custom and your agreement to start anew. The law defines your allowance of food, but not your duties or your working- and sleeping-time. That is left to the discretion of your captain and officers. Precedent —the decision of the courts—has decided the privilege of a captain or officer to punish insolence or lack of respect from a sailor with a blow—of a fist or missile; but, understand me now, a return of the blow makes that man a mutineer, and his prompt killing is justified by the law of the land. Is this plain to you? You are here to answer and

obey orders respectfully, adding the word 'sir' to each response; you are never to go to windward of an officer, or address him by name without the prefix 'Mr.'; and you are to work civilly and faithfully, resenting nothing said to you until you are discharged in an American port at the end of the voyage. A failure in this will bring you prompt punishment; and resentment of this punishment on your part will bring—death. Mr. Jackson," he concluded, turning to his first officer, "overhaul their dunnage, turn them to, and man the windlass."

A man—the bald-headed Sinful Peck—sprang forward; but his face was not cherubic now. His blue eyes blazed with emotion much in keeping with his sobriquet; and, raising his hand, the nervously crooking fingers of which made it almost a fist, he said, in a voice explosively strident:

"That's all right. That's *your* say. You've described the condition o' nigger slaves, not American voters. And I'll tell you one thing, right here—I'm a free-born citizen. I know my work, and can do it, without bein' cursed and abused; and if you or your mates rub my fur the wrong way I'm goin' to claw back; and if I'm shot, you want to shoot sure; for if you don't, I'll kill that man, if I have to lash my knife to a broom-handle, and prod him through his window when he's asleep."

But alas for Sinful Peck! He had barely finished his defiance when he fell like a log under the impact of the big mate's fist; then, while the pilot, turning his back on the painful scene, walked aft, nodding and shaking his head, and the captain's strong language and leveled shotgun induced the men to an agitated acquiescence, the two officers kicked and stamped upon the little man until consciousness left him. Before he recovered he had been ironed to a stanchion in the 'tween-deck, and entered in the captain's official log for threatening life. And by this time the dunnage had been searched, a few sheath-knives tossed overboard, and the remaining ten men were moodily heaving in the chain.

And so, with a crippled crew of schooner sailors, the square-rigger *Almena* was towed to sea, smoldering rebellion in one end of her, the power of the law in the other—murder in the heart of every man on board.

CHAPTER IV

READING THE ROLL CALL

FIVE months later the *Almena* lay at an outer mooring-buoy in Callao Roads, again ready for sea, but waiting. With her at the anchorage were representatives of most of the maritime nations. English ships and barks with painted ports, and spider-web braces, high-sided, square-sterned American half-clippers, clumsy, square-bowed "Dutchmen," coasting-brigs of any nation, lumber-schooners from "'Frisco," hide-carriers from Valparaiso, pearl-boats and fishermen, and even a couple of homesick Malay proas from the west crowded the roadstead; for the guano trade was booming, and Callao prosperous. Nearly every type of craft known to sailors was there; but the postman and the policeman of the seas — the coastwise mail-steamer and the heavily sparred man-of-war — were conspicuously absent. The Pacific Mail boat would not arrive for a week, and the last cruiser had departed two days before.

Beyond the faint land and sea breeze there was no wind nor promise of it for several days; and Captain Benson, though properly cleared at the custom-house for New York, was in no hurry, and had taken advantage of the delay to give a dinner to some captains with whom he had fraternized on shore. "I've a first-rate steward," he had told them, "and I'll treat you well; and I've the best-trained crew that ever went to sea. Come, all of you, and bring your first officers. I want to give you an object-lesson on the influence of matter

over mind that you can't learn in the books."

So they came, at half-past eleven, in their own ships' dinghies, which were sent back with orders to return at nightfall—six big-fisted, more or less fat captains, and six big-fisted, beetle-browed, and embarrassed chief mates. As they climbed the gangway they were met and welcomed by Captain Benson, who led them to the poop, the only dry and clean part of the ship; for the *Almena's* crew were holy-stoning the main deck, and as this operation consists in grinding off the oiled surface of the planks with sandstone, the resulting slime of sand, oily wood-pulp, and salt water made walking unpleasant, as well as being very hard on polished shoe leather. But in this filthy slime the men were on their knees, working the six-inch blocks of stone, technically called "bibles," back and forth with about the speed and motion of an energetic woman over a washboard.

The mates also were working. With legs clad in long rubber boots, they filled buckets at the deck-pump and scattered water around where needed, occasionally throwing the whole bucketful at a doubtful spot on the deck to expose it to criticism. As the visitors lined up against the monkey-rail and looked down on the scene, Mr. Becker launched such a bucketful as only a second mate can—and a man who happened to be in the way was rolled over by the unexpected impact. He gasped a little louder than might have been necessary, and the wasting of the bucketful of water having forced Mr. Becker to make an extra trip to the pump, the officer was duly incensed.

"Get out o' the way, there," he bawled, eying the man sternly. "What are you gruntin' at? A little water won't hurt you—soap neither."

He went to the pump for more water, and the man crawled back to his holystone. It was Bigpig Monahan, hollow-eyed and thin, slow in his voluntary movements; minus his look of injury, too, as though he might have welcomed the bowling over as a momentary respite for his aching muscles.

Now and then, when the officers' faces were partly turned, a man would stop, rise erect on his knees, and bend backward. A man may work holystone much longer and press it much harder on the deck for these occasional stretchings of contracted tissue; but the two mates chose to ignore this physiological fact, and a moment later, a little man, caught in the act by Mr. Jackson, was also rolled over on his back, not by a bucket of water, but by the boot of the mate, who uttered words suitable to the occasion, and held his hand in his pocket until the little man, grinning with rage, had resumed his work.

"There," said Captain Benson to his guests on the poop; "see that little devil! See him show his teeth! That is Mr. Sinful Peck. I've had him in irons with a broken head five times, and the log is full of him. I towed him over the stern running down the trades to take the cussedness out of him, and if he had not been born for higher things, he'd have drowned. He was absolutely unconquerable until I found him telling his beads one time in irons and took them away from him. Now to get an occasional chance at them he is fairly quiet."

"So this is your trained crew, is it, captain?" said a grizzled old skipper of the party. "What ails that fellow down in the scuppers with a prayer-book?" He pointed to a man who with one hand was rubbing a small holystone in a corner where a large one would not go.

"Ran foul of the big end of a handspike," answered Captain Benson, quietly; "he'll carry his arm in splints all the way home, I think. His name is Gunner Meagher. I don't know how they got their names, but they signed them and will answer to them. They are unique. Look at that outlaw down there by the bitts. That is Poop-deck Cahill. Looks like a prizefighter,

doesn't he? But the steward tells me that he was educated for the priesthood, and fell by the wayside. That one close to the hatch—the one with the red head and hang-dog jib—is Seldom Helward. He was shot off the cro'-jack yard; he fell into the lee clew of the cro'-jack, so we pulled him in."

"What did he do, captain?" asked the grizzled skipper.

"Threw a marlinespike at the mate."

"What made him throw it?"

"Never asked. I suppose he objected to something said to him."

"Ought to ha' killed him on the yard. Are they all of a kind?"

"Every man. Not one knew the ropes or his place when he shipped. They're schooner sailors from the Lakes, where the captain, if he is civil and respectful to his men, is as good as any of them. They started to clean us up the first day, but failed, and I went to sea with them. Since then, until lately, it has been war to the knife. I've set more bones, mended more heads, and plugged more shot-holes on this passage than ever before, and my officers have grown perceptibly thinner; but little by little, man by man, we've broken them in. Still, I admit, it was a job. Why, that same Seldom Helward I ironed and ran up on the fall of a main-buntline. We were rolling before a stiff breeze and sea, and he would swing six feet over each rail and bat against the mast in transit; but the dog stood it eight hours before he stopped cursing us. Then he was unconscious. When he came to in the forecastle, he was ready to begin again; but they stopped him. They're keeping a log, I learn, and are going to law. Every time a man gets thumped they enter tragedy, and all sign their names."

Captain Benson smiled dignifiedly in answer to the outburst of laughter evoked by this, and the men below lifted their haggard, hopeless faces an instant and looked at the party with eyes that were furtive—cat-like. The grinding of the stones prevented their hearing the talk, but they knew that they were being laughed at.

"Never knew a sailor yet," wheezed a portly and asthmatic captain, "who wasn't ready to sue the devil and try the court in hell when he's at sea. Trouble is, they never get past the first saloon."

"They got a little law here," resumed Captain Benson, quietly. "I put them all in the guardo. The consul advised it, and committed them for fear they might desert when we lay at the dock. When I took them out to run to the islands, they complained of being starved; and to tell the truth, they didn't throw their next meal overboard as usual. Nevertheless, a good four weeks' board-bill comes out of their wages. I don't think they'll have a big pay-day in New York: the natives cleaned out the forecastle in their absence, and they'll have to draw heavily on my slop-chest."

"That's where captains have the best of it," said one of the mates, jocularly—and presumptuously, to judge by his captain's frown; "we hammer 'em around and wear out their clothes, and it's the captain that sells 'em new ones."

"Captain," said the grizzled one, who had been scanning the crew intently, "I'd pay that crew off if I were you; you ought to ha' let 'em run, or worked 'em out and saved their pay. Look at 'em—look at the devils in their eyes. I notice your mates seldom turn their backs on 'em. I'd get rid of 'em."

"What! Just when we have them under control and useful? Oh, no! They know their work now, and I'd only have to ship a crowd of beach-combers and half-breeds at nearly double pay. Besides, gentlemen, we're just a little proud of this crew. They are lake sailors from Oswego, a little port on Lake Ontario. When I was young I sailed on the Lakes a season or two and became thoroughly acquainted with the aggressive self-respect of that breed. They would rather fight than eat. Their reputation in this regard prevents

them getting berths in any but Oswego vessels, and even affects the policy of the nation. There's a fort at Oswego, and whenever a company of soldiers anywhere in the country become unmanageable—when their officers can't control them outside the guard-house—the War Department at Washington transfers them to Oswego for the tutelage they will get from the sailors. And they get it; they are well behaved, well-licked soldiers when they leave. An Oswego sailor loves a row. He is possessed by the fighting spirit of a bulldog; he inherits it with his Irish sense of injury; he sucks it in with his mother's milk, and drinks it in with his whisky; and when no enemies are near, he will fight his friends. Pay them off? Not much. I've taken sixteen of those devils round the Horn, and I'll take them back. I'm proud of them. Just look at them," he concluded vivaciously, as he waved his hand at his men; "docile and obedient, down on their knees with bibles and prayer-books."

"And the name o' the Lord on their lips," grunted the adviser; "but not in prayer, I'll bet you."

"Hardly," laughed Captain Benson. "Come below, gentlemen, the steward is ready."

From lack of facilities the mild-faced and smiling steward could not serve that dinner with the style which it deserved. He would have liked, he explained, as they seated themselves, to bring it on in separate courses; but one and all disclaimed such frivolity. The dinner was there, and that was enough. And it was a splendid dinner. In front of Captain Benson, at the head of the table, stood a large tureen of smoking terrapin-stew; next to that a stuffed and baked freshly caught fish; and waiting their turn in the center of the spread, a couple of brace of wild geese from the inland lakes, brown and glistening, oyster-dressed and savory. Further along was a steaming plum-pudding, overhead on a swinging tray a dozen bottles of wine, by the captain's elbow a decanter of yellow fluid, and before each man's plate a couple of glasses of different size.

"We'll start off with an appetizer, gentlemen," said the host, as he passed the decanter to his neighbor. "Here is some of the best Dutch courage ever distilled; try it."

The decanter went around, each filling his glass and holding it poised; then, when all were supplied, they drank to the grizzled old captain's toast: "A speedy and pleasant passage home for the *Almena,* and further confusion to her misguided crew." The captain responded gracefully, and began serving the stew, which the steward took from him plate by plate, and passed around.

But, either because thirteen men had sat down to that table, or because the Fates were unusually freakish that day, it was destined that, beyond the initial glass of whiskey, not a man present should partake of Captain Benson's dinner. On deck things had been happening, and just as the host had filled the last plate for himself, a wet, bedraggled, dirty little man, his tarry clothing splashed with the slime of the deck, his eyes flaming green, his face expanded to a smile of ferocity, appeared in the forward doorway, holding a cocked revolver which covered them all. Behind him in the passage were other men, equally unkempt, their eyes wide open with excitment and anticipation.

"Don't ye move," yelped the little man, "not a man. Keep yer hands out o' yer pockets. Put 'em over yer heads. That's it. You too, cappen."

They obeyed him (there was death in the green eyes and smile), all but one. Captain Benson sprang to his feet, with a hand in his breast pocket.

"You scoundrels!" he cried, as he drew forth a pistol. "Leave this—" The speech was stopped by a report, deafening in the closed-up space; and Captain Benson fell heavily, his pistol rattling on the floor.

"Hang me up, will ye?" growled another voice through the smoke.

In the after-door were more men, the red-haired Seldom Helward in the van, holding a smoking pistol. "Get the gun one o' you fellows over there."

A man stepped in and picked up the pistol, which he cocked.

"One by one," said Seldom, his voice rising to the pitch and timbre of a trumpet-blast, "you men walk out the forward companionway with your hands over your heads. Plug them, Sinful, if two move together, and shoot to kill."

Taken by surprise, the guests, resolute men though they were, obeyed the command. As each rose to his feet, he was first relieved of a bright revolver, which served to increase the moral front of the enemy, then led out to the booby-hatch, on which lay a newly broached coil of hambro-line and pile of thole-pins from the boatswain's locker. Here he was searched again for jack-knife or brass knuckles, bound with the hambro-line, gagged with a thole-pin, and marched forward, past the prostrate first mate, who lay quiet in the scuppers, and the erect but agonized second mate, gagged and bound to the fife-rail, to the port forecastle, where he was locked in with the Chinese cook, who, similarly treated, had preceded. The mild-faced steward, weeping now, as much from professional disappointment as from stronger emotion, was questioned sternly, and allowed his freedom on his promise not to "sing out" or make trouble. Captain Benson was examined, his injury diagnosed as brain-concussion, from the glancing bullet, more or less serious, and dragged out to the scuppers, where he was bound beside his unconscious first officer. Then, leaving them to live or die as their subconsciousness determined, the sixteen mutineers, sacrilegiously reëntered the cabin and devoured the dinner. And the appetites they displayed—their healthy, hilarious enjoyment of the good things on the table—so affected the professional sense of the steward that he ceased his weeping, and even smiled as he waited on them.

When you have cursed, beaten, and kicked a slave for five months it is always advisable to watch him for a few seconds after you administer correction, to give him time to realize his condition. And when you have carried a revolver in the right-hand trousers pocket for five months it is advisable occasionally to inspect the cloth of the pocket to make sure that it is not wearing thin from the chafe of the muzzle. Mr. Jackson had ignored the first rule of conduct, Mr. Becker the second. Mr. Jackson had kicked Sinful Peck once too often; but not knowing that it was once too often, had immediately turned his back, and received thereat the sharp corner of a bible on his bump of inhabitiveness, which bump responded in its function; for Mr. Jackson showed no immediate desire to move from the place where he fell. Beyond binding, he received no further attention from the men. Mr. Becker, on his way to the lazarette in the stern for a bucket of sand to assist in the holy-stoning, had reached the head of the poop steps when this occurred; and turning at the sound of his superior's fall, had bounded to the main-deck without touching the steps, reaching for his pistol as he landed only to pinion his fingers in a large hole in the pocket. Wildly he struggled to reclaim his weapon, down his trouser leg, held firmly to his knee by the tight rubber boot; but he could not reach it. His anxious face betrayed his predicament to the wakening men, and when he looked into Mr. Jackson's revolver, held by Sinful Peck, he submitted to being bound to the fife-rail and gagged with the end of the topgallant-sheet—a large rope, which just filled his mouth, and hurt. Then the firearm was recovered and the descent upon the dinner-party quickly planned and carried out.

Have you ever seen a kennel of hunting dogs released on a fine day after long confinement—how they bark and yelp, chasing one another, biting play-

fully, rolling and tumbling over and over in sheer joy and healthy appreciation of freedom? Without the vocal expression of emotion, the conduct of these men after that wine dinner was very similar to that of such emancipated dogs. They waltzed, boxed, wrestled, threw each other about the deck, turned handsprings and cart-wheels,—those not too weak,—buffeted, kicked, and clubbed the suffering Mr. Becker, reviled and cursed the unconscious captain and chief officer, and when tired of this, as children and dogs of play, they turned to their captives for amusement. The second mate was taken from the fife-rail, with hands still bound, and led to the forecastle; the gags of all and the bonds of the cook were removed, and the dinner was brought from the galley. This they were invited to eat. There was a piece of salt-beef, boiled a little longer than usual on account of the delay; it was black brown, green, and iridescent in spots; it was slippery with ptomaines, filthy to the sight, stinking, and nauseating. There were potatoes, two years old, shriveled before boiling—hard and soggy, black, blue, and bitter after the process. And there was the usual "weevily hard-tack" in the bread-barge.

Protest was useless. The unhappy captives surrounded that dinner on the forecastle floor (for there was neither table to sit at, nor chests, stools, or boxes to sit on, in the apartment), and, with hands behind their backs and disgust on their faces, masticated and swallowed the morsels which the Chinese cook put to their mouths, while their feelings were further outraged by the hilarity of the men at their backs, and their appetites occasionally jogged into activity by the impact on their heads of a tarry fist or pistol-butt. At last a portly captain began vomiting, and this being contagious, the meal ended; for even the stomachs of the sailors, overcharged as they were with the rich food and wine of the cabin table, were affected by the spectacle.

There were cool heads in that crowd of mutineers—men who thought of consequences: Poop-deck Cahill, square-faced and resolute, but thoughtful of eye and refined of speech; Seldom Helward, who had shot the captain—a man whose fiery hair, arching eyebrows, Roman nose, and explosive language indicated the daredevil, but whose intelligent though humorous eye and corrugated forehead gave certain signs of repressive study and thought; and Bigpig Monahan, already described. These three men went into session under the break of the poop, and came to the conclusion that the consul who had jailed them for nothing would hang them for this; then, calling the rest to the conference as a committee of the whole, they outlined and put to vote a proposition to make sail and go to sea, leaving the fate of their captives for later consideration—which was adopted unanimously and with much profanity, the central thought of the latter being an intention to "make 'em finish the holystonin' for the fun they had laughin' at us." Then Bigpig Monahan sneaked below and induced the steward to toss through the storeroom dead-light every bottle of wine and liquor which the ship contained. "For Seldom and Poop-deck," he said to him, "are the only men in the gang fit to pick up navigation and git this ship into port again; but if they git their fill of it, it's all day with you, steward."

Six second mates on six American ships watched curiously, doubtingly, and at last anxiously, as sails were dropped and yards mastheaded on board the *Almena,* and as she paid off from the mooring-buoy before the land breeze and showed them her stern, sent six dinghies, which gave up the pursuit in a few minutes and mustered around the buoy, where a wastefully slipped shot of anchor-chain gave additional evidence that all was not right. But by the time the matter was reported to the authorities ashore, the *Almena,* having caught the newly arrived southerly wind

off the Peruvian coast, was hull down on the western horizon.

Four days later, one of the *Almena's* boats, containing twelve men with sore heads, disfigured faces, and clothing ruined by oily wood-pulp,—ruined particularly about the knees of their trousers—came wearily into the roadstead from the open sea, past the shipping and up to the landing at the custom-house docks. From here the twelve proceeded to the American consul and entered bitter complaint of inhuman treatment received at the hands of sixteen mutinous sailors on board the *Almena*—treatment so cruel that they had welcomed being turned adrift in an open boat; whereat, the consul, deploring the absence of a man-of-war or steamer to send in pursuit, took their individual affidavits; and these he sent to San Francisco, from which point the account of the crime, described as piracy, spread to every newspaper in Christendom.

CHAPTER V

SIGHTING SANDY HOOK

A NORTHEAST gale off Hatteras: immense gray combers, five to the mile, charging, shoreward, occasionally breaking, again lifting their heads too high in the effort, truncated as by a knife, and the liquid apex shattered to spray; an expanse of leaden sky showing between the rain-squalls, across which heavy background rushed the darker scud and storm clouds; a passenger steamer rolling helplessly in the trough, and a square-rigged vessel, hove to on the port tack, two miles to windward of the steamer, and drifting south toward the storm-center. This is the picture that the sea-birds saw at daybreak on a September morning, and could the sea-birds have spoken they might have told that the square-rigged craft carried a navigator who had learned that a whirling fury of storm-center was less to be feared than the deadly Diamond Shoals—the outlying guard of Cape Hatteras toward which that steamer was drifting, broadside on.

Clad in yellow oilskins and sou'wester, he stood by the after-companionway, intently examining through a pair of glasses the wallowing steamer to leeward, barely distinguishable in the half-light and driving spindrift. On the main deck a half-dozen men paced up and down, sheltered by the weather rail; forward, two others walked the deck by the side of the forward house, but never allowed their march to extend past the after-corner; and at the wheel stood a little man who sheltered a cheerful face under the lee of a big coat collar, and occasionally peeped out at the navigator.

"Poop-deck," he shouted above the noise of the wind, "take the wheel till I fire up,"

"Thought I was exempt from steering," growled the other, good-humoredly, as he placed the glasses inside the companionway.

"You're getting too fat and sassy; steer a little."

Poop-deck relieved the little man, who descended the cabin stairs, and returned in a few moments, smoking a short pipe. He took the wheel, and Poop-deck again examined the steamer with the glasses.

"There goes his ensign, union down," he exclaimed; "he's in trouble. We'll show ours."

From a flag-locker inside the companionway he drew out the Stars and Stripes, which he ran up to the monkey-gaff. Then he looked again.

"Down goes his ensign; up goes the code pennant. He wants to signal. Come up here, boys," called Poop-deck; "give me a hand."

As the six men climbed the steps, he pulled out the corresponding code signal from the locker, and ran it up on the other part of the halyards as the ensign fluttered down. "Go down, one of you," he said, "and get the signal-book and shipping list. He'll show his number next. Get ours ready—R. L. F. T."

While a man sprang below for the books named, the others hooked together the signal flags forming the ship's number, and Poop-deck resumed the glasses.

"Q. T. F. N.," he exclaimed. "Look it up."

The books had arrived, and while one lowered and hoisted again the code signal, which was also the answering-pennant, the others pored over the shipping list.

"Steamer *Aldebaran* of New York," they said.

The pennant came down, and the ship's number went up to the gaff.

"H. V.," called Poop-deck, as he scanned two flags now flying from the steamer's truck. "What does that say?"

"Damaged rudder — cannot steer," they answered.

"Pull down the number and show the answering pennant again," said Poop-deck; "and let me see that signal-book." He turned the leaves, studied a page for a moment, then said: "Run up H. V. R. That says, 'What do you want?' and that's the nearest thing to it."

These flags took the place of the answering pennant, then the letters K. R. N.

"What does K. R. N. say?" he asked.

They turned the leaves, and answered: "I can tow you."

"Tow us? We're all right; we don't want a tow. He's crazy. How can he tow us when he can't steer?" exclaimed three or four together.

"He wants to tow us so that he *can* steer, you blasted fools," said Poop-deck. "He can keep head to sea and go where he likes with a big drag on his stern."

"That's so. Where's he bound—'you that has knowledge and eddication'?"

"Didn't say; but he's bound for the Diamond Shoals, and he'll fetch up in three hours, if we can't help him. He's close in."

"Tow-line's down the forepeak," said a man. "Couldn't get it up in an hour," said another. "Yes, we can," said a third. Then, all speaking at once, and each raising his voice to its limit, they argued excitedly: "Can't be done." "Coil it on the forecastle." "Yes, we can." "Too much sea." "Run down to wind'ard." "Line'ud part, anyhow." "Float a barrel." "Shut up." "I tell you, we can." "Call the watch." "Seldom, yer daft." "Needn't get a boat over." "Hell ye can." "Call the boys." "All hands with heavin'-lines." "Can't back a topsail in this." "Go lay down." "Soak yer head, Seldom." "Hush." "Shut up." "Nothin' *you* can't do." "Go to the devil." "I tell you, we can; do as I say, and we'll get a line to him, or get his."

The affirmative speaker, who had also uttered the last declaration, was Seldom Helward. "Put me in command," he yelled excitely, "and do what I tell you, and we'll make fast to him."

"No captains here," growled one, while the rest eyed Seldom reprovingly.

"Well, there ought to be; you're all rattled, and don't know any more than to let thousands o' dollars slip past you. There's salvage down to looward."

"Salvage?"

"Yes, salvage. Big boat—full o' passengers and valuable cargo—shoals to looward of him—can't steer. You poor fools, what ails you?"

"Foller Seldom," vociferated the little man at the wheel; "foller Seldom, and ye'll wear stripes."

"Dry up, Sinful. Call the watch. It's near seven bells, anyhow. Let's hear what the rest say. Strike the bell."

The uproarious howl with which sailors call the watch below was delivered down the cabin stairs, and soon eight other men came up, rubbing their eyes and grumbling at the premature wakening, while another man came out of the forecastle and joined the two pacing the forward deck. Seldom Helward's proposition was discussed noisily in joint session on the poop, and finally accepted.

"We put you in charge, Seldom,

against the rule," said Bigpig Monahan, sternly, "'cause we think you've some good scheme in your head; but if you haven't,—if you make a mess of things just to have a little fun bossin' us—you'll hear from us. Go ahead, now. You're captain."

Seldom climbed to the top of the afterhouse, looked to windward, then to leeward at the rolling steamer, and called out:

"I want more beef at the wheel. Bigpig, take it; and you, Turkey, stand by with him. Get away from there, Sinful. Give her the upper maintopsail, the rest of you. Poop-deck, you stand by the signal-halyards. Ask him if he's got a tow-line ready."

Protesting angrily at the slight put upon him, Sinful Peck relinquished the wheel, and joined the rest on the main-deck, where they had hurried. Two men went aloft to loose the topsail, and the rest cleared away gear, while Poop-deck examined the signal book.

"K. S. G. says 'Have a tow-line ready. That ought to do, Seldom," he called.

"Run it up," ordered the newly installed captain, "and watch his answer." Up went the signal, and as the men on the main deck were manning the top-sail halyards, Poop-deck made out the answer: "V. K. C."

"That means, 'All right,' Seldom," he said, after inspecting the book.

"Good enough; but we'll get our line ready, too. Get down and help 'em masthead the yard first, then take 'em forrard and coil the tow-line abaft the windlass. Get all the heavin'-line ready, too"

Poop-deck obeyed; and while the maintopsail-yard slowly arose to place under the efforts of the rest, Seldom himself ran up the answering pennant, and then the repetition of the steamer's last message: "All right." This was the final signal displayed between the two craft. Both signal-flags were lowered, and for a half-hour Seldom waited, until the others had lifted a nine-inch hawser from the forepeak and coiled it down. Then came his next orders in a continuous roar:

"Three hands aft to the spanker-sheet! Stand by to slack off and haul in! Man the braces for wearing ship, the rest o' you? Hard up the wheel! Check in port main and starboard cro'-jack braces! Shiver the topsail! Slack off that spanker!"

Before he had finished the men had reached their posts. The orders were obeyed. The ship paid off, staggered a little in the trough under the right-angle pressure of the gale, swung still farther, and steadied down to a long, rolling motion, dead before the wind, heading for the steamer. Yards were squared in, the spanker hauled aft, staysail trimmed to port, and all hands waited while the ship charged down the two miles of intervening sea.

"Handles like a yacht," muttered Seldom, as, with brow wrinkled and keen eye flashing above his hooked nose, he conned the steering from his place near the mizzenmast.

Three men separated themselves from the rest and came aft. They were those who had walked the forward deck. One was tall, broad-shouldered, and smooth-shaven, with a palpable limp; another, short, broad, and hairy, showed a lamentable absence of front teeth; and the third, a blue-eyed man, slight and graceful of movement, carried his arm in splints and sling. This last was in the van as they climbed to the poop steps.

"I wish to protest" he said. "I am captain of this ship under the law. I protest against this insanity. No boat can live in this sea. No help can be given that steamer."

"And I bear witness to the protest," said the tall man. The short, hairy man might have spoken also, but had no time.

"Get off the poop," yelled Seldom. "Go forrard, where you belong." He stood close to the bucket-rack around the skylight. Seizing bucket after bucket, he launched them at his visitors,

with the result that the big man was tumbled down the poop steps head first, while the other two followed, right side up, but hurriedly, and bearing some sore spots. Then the rest of the men set upon them, much as a pack of dogs would worry strange cats, and kicked and buffeted them forward.

There was no time for much amusement of this sort. Yards were braced to port, for the ship was careering down toward the steamer at a ten-knot rate; and soon black dots on her rail resolved into passengers waving hats and handkerchiefs, and black dots on the boat deck resolved into sailors standing by the end of a hawser which led up from the bits below on the fantail. And the ship came down, until it might have seemed that Seldom's intention was to ram her. But not so; when a scant two lengths separated the two craft, he called out: "Hard down! Light up the staysail-sheet and stand by the fore-braces!"

Around the ship came on the crest of a sea; she sank into the hollow behind, shipped a few dozen tons of water from the next comber, and then lay fairly steady, with her bow meeting the seas, and the huge steamer not a half-length away on the lee quarter. The fore-topmast-staysail was flattened, and Seldom closely scrutinized the drift and heave of the ship.

"How's your wheel, Bigpig?" he asked.

"Hard down."

"Put it up a little; keep her in the trough."

He noted the effect on the ship of this change; then, as though satisfied, roared out: "Let your forebraces hang, forrard there! Stand by heavin'-lines fore and aft! Stand by to go ahead with that steamer when we have your line!" The last injunction, delivered through his hands, went down the wind like a thunder-clap, and the officers on the steamer's bridge, vainly trying to make themselves heard against the gale in the same manner, started perceptibly at the impact of sound, and one went to the engine-room speaking tube.

Breast to breast the two vessels lifted and fell. At times it seemed that the ship was to be dropped bodily on the deck of the steamer; at others, her crew looked up a streaked slope of a hundred feet to where the other craft was poised at the crest. Then the steamer would drop, and the next sea would heave the ship toward her. But it was noticeable that every bound brought her nearer to the steamer, and also farther ahead, for her sails were doing their work.

"Kick ahead on board the steamer!" thundered Seldom from his eminence. "Go ahead! Start the wagon, or say your prayers, you blasted idiots!"

The engines were already turning; but it takes time to overcome three thousand tons of inertia, and before the steamer had forged ahead six feet the ship had lifted above her, and descended her black side with a grinding crash of wood against iron. Fore and main channels on the ship were carried away, leaving all lee rigging slack and useless; lower braces caught in the steamer's davit-cleats and snapped, but the sails, held by the weather braces, remained full, and the yards did not swing. The two craft separated with a roll and came together again with more scraping and snapping of rigging. Passengers left the rail, dived indoors, and took refuge on the opposite side, where falling blocks and small spars might not reach them. Another leap toward the steamer resulted in the ship's maintopgallant-mast falling in a zigzag whirl, as the snapping gear aloft impeded it; and dropping athwart the steamer's funnel, it neatly sent the royal yard with sail attached down the iron cylinder, where it soon blazed and helped the artificial draft in the stokehold. Next came the foretopgallantmast, which smashed a couple of boats. Then, as the round black stern of the steamer scraped the lee bow of the ship, jib-guys parted, and the jib-boom itself went,

snapping at the bowsprit-cap, with the last bite the ship made at the steamer she was helping. But all through this riot of destruction—while passengers screamed and prayed, while officers on the steamer shouted and swore, and Seldom Helward, bellowing insanely, danced up and down on the ship's house, and the hail of wood and iron from aloft threatened their heads—men were passing the tow-line.

It was a three-inch steel hawser with a Manila tail, which they had taken to the foretopsail-sheet bitts before the jib-boom had gone. Panting from their exertions, they watched it lift from the water as the steamer ahead paid out with a taut strain; then, though the crippled spars were in danger of falling and really needed their first attention, they ignored the fact and hurried aft, as one man, to attend to Seldom.

Encouraged by the objurgations of Bigpig and his assistant, who were steering now after the steamer, they called their late commander down from the house and deposed him in a concert of profane ridicule and abuse, to which he replied in kind. He was struck in the face by the small fist of Sinful Peck, and immediately knocked the little man down. Then he was knocked down himself by a larger fist, and, fighting bravely and viciously, became the object of fist-blows and kicks, until, in one of his whirling staggers along the deck, he passed close to the short, broad, hairy man, who yielded to the excitement of the moment and added a blow to Seldom's punishment. It was an unfortunate mistake; for he took Seldom's place, and the rain of fists and boots descended on him until he fell unconscious. Mr. Helward himself delivered the last quieting blow, and then stood over him with a lurid grin on his bleeding face.

"Got to put down mutiny though the heavens fall," he said painfully.

"Right you are, Seldom," answered one. "Here, Jackson, Benson—drag him forrard; and, Seldom," he added, reprovingly, "don't you ever try it again. Want to be captain, hey? You can't; you don't know enough. You couldn't command my wheelbarrow. Here's three day's work to clear up the muss you've made."

But in this they spoke more, and less, than the truth. The steamer, going slowly, and steering with a bridle from the tow-line to each quarter, kept the ship's canvas full until her crew had steadied the yards and furled it. They would then have rigged preventer-stays and shrouds on their shaky spar, had their been time; but there was not. An uncanny appearance of the sea to leeward indicated too close proximity to the shoals, while a blackening of the sky to windward told of probable increase of wind and sea. And the steamer waited no longer. With a preliminary blast of her whistle, she hung the weight of the ship on the starboard bridle, gave power to her engines, and rounded to, very slowly, head to sea, while the men on the ship, who had been carrying the end of the coiled hawser up the foretopmast rigging, dropped it and came down hurriedly.

Released from the wind pressure on her strong side, which had somewhat steadied her, the ship now rolled more than she had done in the trough, and with every starboard roll were ominous creakings and grindings aloft. At last came a heavier lurch, and both crippled topmasts fell, taking with them the mizzentopgallantmast. Luckily, no one was hurt, and they disgustedly cut the wreck adrift, stayed the fore- and mainmasts with the hawser, and resigning themselves to a large subtraction from their salvage, went to a late breakfast—a savory meal of smoking fried ham and potatoes, hot cakes and coffee, served to sixteen in the cabin, and an unsavory meal of "hardtack-hash," with an infusion of burnt bread-crust, pease, beans, and leather, handed, but not served, to three in the forecastle.

Three days later, with Sandy Hook lighthouse showing through the haze

ahead, and nothing left of the gale but a rolling ground-swell, the steamer slowed down so that a pilot-boat's dinghy could put a man aboard each craft. And the one who climbed the ship's side was the pilot that had taken her to sea, outward bound, and sympathized with her crew. They surrounded him on the poop and asked for news, while the three men forward looked aft hungrily, as though they would have joined the meeting, but dared not. Instead of giving news, the pilot asked questions, which they answered.

"I knew you'd taken charge, boys," he said at length. "The whole world knows it, and every man-of-war on the Pacific stations has been looking for you. But they're only looking out there. What brings you round here, dismasted, towing into New York?"

"That's where the ship's bound—New York. We took her out; we bring her home. We don't want her—don't belong to us. We're law-abidin' men."

"Law-abiding men?" asked the amazed pilot.

"You bet. We're goin' to prosecute those dogs of ours forrard there to the last limit o' the law. We'll show 'em they can't starve and hammer and shoot free-born Americans just 'cause they've got guns in their pockets."

The pilot looked forward, nodded to one of the three, who beckoned to him, and asked:

"Who'd you elect captain?"

"Nobody," they roared. "We had enough o' captains. This ship's an unlimited democracy—everybody just as good as the next man; that is, all but the dogs. They sleep on the bunkboards, do as they're told, and eat salt mule and dunderfunk—same as we did goin' out."

"Did they navigate for you? Did no one have charge of things?"

"Poop-deck picked up navigation, and we let him off steerin' and standin' lookout. Then Seldom, here, he wanted to be captain just once, and we let him—well, look at our spars."

"Poop-deck? Which is Poop-deck? Do you mean to say," asked the pilot when the navigator had been indicated to him, "that you brought this ship home on picked-up navigation?"

"Didn't know anything about it when we left Callao," answered the sailor, modestly. "The steward knew enough to wind the chronometer until I learned how. We made an offing and steered due south, while I studied the books and charts. It didn't take me long to learn how to take the sun. Then we blundered round the Horn somehow, and before long I could take chronometer sights for the longitude. Of course I know we went out in four months and used up five to get back; but a man can't learn the whole thing in one passage. We lost some time, too, chasing other ships and buying stores; the cabin grub gave out."

"You bought, I suppose, with Captain Benson's money."

"S'pose it was his. We found it in his desk. But we've kept account of every cent expended and bought no grub too good for a white man to eat."

"What dismasted you?"

They explained the meeting with the steamer and Seldom's misdoing; then requested information about the salvage laws.

"Boys," said the pilot, "I'm sorry for you. I saw the start of this voyage, and you appear to be decent men. You'll get no salvage; you'll get no wages. You are mutineers and pirates, with no standing in court. Any salvage which the *Almena* has earned will be paid to her owners and to the three men whom you deprived of command. What you can get—the maximum, though I can't say how hard the judge will lay it on—is ten years in state's prison, and a fine of two thousand dollars each. We'll have to stop at quarantine. Take my advice: if you get a chance, lower the boats and skip."

They laughed at the advice. They were American citizens who respected

the law. They had killed no one, robbed no one; their wages and salvage, independently of insurance liabilities, would pay for the stores bought, and the loss of the spars. They had no fear of any court of justice in the land; for they had only asserted their manhood and repressed inhuman brutality.

The pilot went forward, talked awhile with the three, and left them with joyous faces. An hour later he pointed out the *Almena's* number flying from the masthead of the steamer.

"He's telling on you, boys," he said. "He knew you when you helped him, and used you, of course. Your reputation's pretty bad on the high seas. See that signal-station ashore there? Well, they're telegraphing now that the pirate *Almena* is coming in. You'll see a police boat at quarantine."

He was but partly right. Not only a police boat, but an outward-bound man-of-war and an incoming revenue cutter escorted the ship to quarantine, where the tow-line was cast off, and an anchor dropped. Then, in the persons of a scandalized health-officer, a naval captain, a revenue-marine lieutenant, and a purple-faced sergeant of the steamboat squad, the power of the law was rehabilitated on the *Almena's* quarter-deck, and the strong hand of the law closed down on her unruly crew. With blank faces, they discarded—to shirts trousers, and boots—the slop-chest clothing which belonged to the triumphant Captain Benson, and descended the side to the police boat, which immediately steamed away. Then a chuckling trio entered the ship's cabin, and ordered the steward to bring them something to eat.

Now, there is no record either in the reports for that year of the police department, or from any official babbling, or from later yarns spun by the sixteen prisoners, of what really occurred on the deck of that steamer while she was going up the bay. Newspapers of the time gave generous space to speculations written up on the facts discovered by reporters; but nothing was ever proved. The facts were few. A tug met the steamer in the Narrows about a quarter to twelve that morning, and her captain, on being questioned, declared that all seemed well with her. The prisoners were grouped forward, guarded by eight officers and a sergeant. A little after twelve o'clock a Battery boatman observed her coming, and hied him around to the police dock to have a look at the murderous pirates he had heard about, only to see her heading up the North River, past the Battery. A watchman on the elevator docks at Sixty-third Street observed her charging up the river a little later in the afternoon, wondered why, and spoke of it. The captain of the *Mary Powell,* bound up, reported catching her abreast of Yonkers. He had whistled as he passed, and though no one was in sight, the salute was politely answered. At some time during the night, residents of Sing Sing were wakened by a sound of steam blowing off somewhere on the river; and in the morning a couple of fishermen, going out to their pound-nets in the early dawn, found the police boat grounded on the shoals. On boarding her they had released a pinioned, gagged, and hungry captain in the pilot-house, and an engineer, fireman, and two deck-hands, similarly limited, in the lamp-room. Hearing noises from below, they pried open the nailed doors of the dining-room staircase, and liberated a purple-faced sergeant and eight furious officers, who chased their deliverers into their skiff, and spoke sternly to the working-force.

Among the theories advanced was one, by the editor of a paper in a small Lake Ontario town, to the effect that it made little difference to an Oswego sailor whether he shipped as captain, mate, engineer, sailor, or fireman, and that the officers of the New York Harbor Patrol had only under-estimated the caliber of the men in their charge, leaving them unguarded while they went to dinner. But his paper and town were

small and far away, he could not possibly know anything of the subject, and his opinion obtained little credence.

Years later, however, he attended, as guest, a meeting and dinner of the Shipmasters' and Pilots' Association of Cleveland, Ohio, when a resolution was adopted to petition the city for a harbor police service. Captain Monahan, Captain Helward, Captain Peck, and Captain Cahill, having spoken and voted in the negative, left their seats on the adoption of the proposition, reached a clear spot on the floor, shook hands silently, and then, forming a ring, danced around in a circle (the tails of their coats standing out in horizontal rigidity) until reproved by the chair.

And the editor knew why.

SAGE BRUSH

When I'm sleepin', seems like I can hear the mules a coughin',—coughin' in the dust.
All at once I'll be sittin' up, pullin' in the sheets, thinkin' that I'm takin' up a little
Jerkline slack. Then I wake up, and life is all a bust, with somethin' gnawin' at my vitals, talkin' to me,
Chantin' like an Injun, till its drove me half insane. And I know what it's sayin'—
Talkin', whisperin', prayin' . . . God! I've got to smell the sage again!

High up among the purple hills I want to go to smell it,—when it's wet with rain and my horse is wading through it,
Belly-deep and happy, drinkin' with me of its fragrance as he tramps it down into the dark brown earth.
Lonely cañons beckon to me—there's a mesa high above the King's, and trout holes in the Santa Rosas,
Of which the phantom voices sing. "There are night-camps in the valleys—don't you know them?—can't you see them—
Little fires with lazy smoke wreathes driftin' round in rings?"

Know them? . . . Say!—just like I know the way the smell o' bacon hits you in the open—
'Bout the time the sun is makin' up his mind to rise. And no one needs to tell me that
The mountain-quail are flyin'—or mention any of the forty kinds of lyin' a cowhand can employ to get a whirl at them,
Even though it's round-up time and the bunch a poundin' leather fourteen hours a day,
Sweatin', swearin,' ridin', ropin'—anythin' to get the stuff aboard the cars.

"Thought you were comin' back again this fall?" those little desert voices taunt me.
"Thought you were goin' to ride the range again just for a spell,
And fill your eyes and ears with sights and sounds the city never knows?"
Oh! I want to go—I've *got* to go before white winter comes to choke the draws and blot the trails from sight.
I've got to smell the sage again—or die!

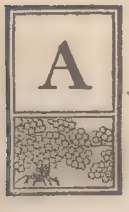
HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO.

Hearts of Men

By Francis James

From a Prison Window His Tired Eyes Saw Mountains, Trees and Singing Birds. And There Was a Girl That Waited—

(Complete Western Action Novel)



AS the big gray motor truck roared up the hill and hovered an instant on the ridge before taking the plunge down the other slope, a bell started ringing loudly from the direction of a cluster of brick buildings a few miles back on the brown dirt country road.

There was no evident reason for the ringing: the time was late afternoon, an hour before dusk; the day was not a holiday, there was no call to fire, nor to services of any sort.

And yet the wild, strident clamor of the huge bell vibrated and echoed in billows of metallic clangings over the miles of sun-bathed farms and dwellings that ringed the little city.

As if startled at the uproar, the motor truck, with a crash of gears, leaped ahead and went clattering and rumbling down the hill in a cloud of dust.

At the bottom of the incline, where the road dipped sharply up again for the long ascent of the next hill, a wide, wooden bridge spanned a river. By all expectations, the driver of the truck should have jammed on gas here for a flying start. Instead, the great car seemed suddenly to slow down, so that the swirl of yellow murk that had swept along behind it rolled ahead, and engulfed it in a densely opaque veil.

In the sudden silence that followed the throwing out of the gears, the jangling tumult of the huge bell crashed in again. And at the precise instant that the truck crossed the middle of the bridge a grey shadow, darting into sight from nowhere, cut the horizon in a long curve and disappeared. A second later, another shadow, slimmer and faster-moving than the first, did likewise.

The driver of the truck, again shifting gears and swinging into the ditch to meet the farm wagon that came clattering up to the threshold of the bridge, saw nothing. The greybeard who drove the hitch, with brow knitting in bewilderment at the clanging of the bell, merely glanced absent-mindedly at the pair of widening ripples in the water and soliloquized that the bass was jumpin 'powerful late that year.

On the narrow apron of stony beach where the bank dipped down to water underneath the bridge, the first grey-clad man clambered out, and, panting from his long swim under water, stood bent half over, sluicing the water out of his hair and ears. A moment later the other, dripping like a wet rat, rose at his side.

The first arrival straightened abruptly, pillowed his hands on his hips, and, with a gleam of something more than surprise in his bright black eyes, inspected the newcomer.

"Well, could I make bold to ask where you dropped from?" he drawled at length, a dry grimace twisting one corner of his thin lips. "I thought the idea was, we was headin' different

"There was a sudden rush and Collins went over backward"

ways, after this—this here's a game two men can't work together, nohow. What's the answer to the surprise party, friend Collins?"

In spite of the cold hostility that chilled his gaze, it was significant that the speaker took care to put his lips close to the other's ear and couch his question in a whisper inaudible at ten-foot distance.

The tall, slender young man whom he had addressed as Collins stared back out of grey eyes as levelly frigid as his black ones before he answered.

"You might have thought so—I didn't," he replied deliberately, with a dry laugh. "All quite nice and clubby, eh, the way you had it fixed—for me to get you outside and then get nipped myself. No, thanks, my friend——"

The face of the first speaker hardened another degree, but his voice softtened to velvet gentleness.

"You've got as good legs as me," he snarled. "Once on the outside, it's every man on his own——"

"With you knowing every inch of the country like the palm of your hand and me not one town from another—naturally," retorted Collins. The thin, white lips under the cold eyes parted in a tight smile.

"Not so that you could notice it, my friend. You couldn't get beyond the wall without me—I can't make my exit from the county without you. . . . And let me suggest that I haven't the least bit more hankering than you have to take out a lease of friend Jolliet's basement apartment for the next six months."

The other man did not answer for a

moment. The gleam in his black eyes now like inky flames, he stood silent for a moment, looking his self-invited partner up and down.

In the lean, clean-cut sweep of arms and legs, and the level gaze of the gray eyes and the firm poise of the lips over the white teeth, he sensed again the mysterious air of difference, of aloofness tinged with defiant recklessness, that had baffled not only him, but all his comrades during the ten months since Collins's arrival in the big pile of brick ruled over by Warden Jolliet.

A crook, in stir for a ten-stretch, he doubtless was. But some way he was different.

And from the moment that Collins, after only six months in stir, was made a trusty, the suspicions, so far no more than guesses in the morbid fancies of the men, froze to certainties—certainties charged with a black malignancy of hate impossible to the imagination of one who has never sojourned in an abode of woe and torment like Warden Jolliet's.

Finishing his scrutiny, the other man spat into the water. The corners of his lips twitched like a cat's as it watches the approach of a bird.

"So you don't figger to make yore get-away without me, hey?" he sneered, with purring viciousness. "Let me tell you, Mister Collins, that it hain't never been the custom hereabouts to furnish guides—a man gen'rally thanks God, 'er the devil, to suit himself, fer gettin' clear, an' then damn well travels the best he can, an' by himself. I don't see no reason fer changing that—an' ef ye ever heered anything about me, ye may know that I gen'rally do as I say in all seeh leetle matters——'

"S-s-s-h!"

Like the hiss of a snake, the warning came suddenly from the lips of Collins. Suddenly galvanized, the two men stood motionless, listening.

In the interval while they talked, the bell had ceased its jangling. And now, into the silence, had suddenly crashed two sounds—the rapid beat of footsteps on the bridge above, and, seemingly, from directly overhead, but actually from the same place as the bell, a wild, unearthly scream, raucous and savage as the hooting of a gigantic prey-bird.

Echoing through the hills, rising and falling in cadences like the wailing of a soul in torment, the savage screechings of the great siren whistle on the prison filled the countryside. Gleams of excitement in the eyes, men everywhere threw down their tools and crowded to the doors to listen. A convict broken out!

And, in the same breath, came the question, grimly sobering, never absent to the inhabitants of Prison County the last five years—was it Peter Robb?

For upward of a decade, Peter Robb had been a name to conjure with. Robb, the desperado, perpetrator of a hundred startling outrages, who had swooped down like an eagle where he was least expected, struck and departed while men were still paralyzed with fright; who, men said, would rather slay than eat.

Exaggerated as this might have been, there was no doubt that Peter Robb was a bad man and deserved to be locked up. He had been highwayman, bandit, train and bank robber. He had roamed the mountains and shot up the valleys seemingly at will, while sheriffs grew grey-headed with the endless game of tag.

Gradually, as his name had become known from one end of the country to the other, the papers had carried columns about his exploits, his incredible luck, his nerve—and, in addition, strangely conflicting stories of his curious streak of old-fashioned, romantic sportsmanship.

Quicker on the draw than any sheriff who had ever chased him, Robb, claimed some, was no savage wolf—on the contrary, he had never killed a victim or an officer of the law. His shots had always been to leg or arm, disabling but not fatal.

Veiled as he was by all this glamor of romance, it was natural that Robb had his secret admirers. Back in Valley City, the home town that had not seen him for thirty years, a certain pride thrilled old residents as they smiled grimly over the headlines and chuckled, "Well, I see Pete Robb's at it again. Clever, ain't he? Hope he don't never take it into his head to come back here, a-visitin', though."

To tourists they would point out the empty, tumble-down house at the south end of the square and orate importantly, shifting their quids.

"Ye hearn tell o' Peter Robb, th' desperado, ain't ye? Well, thare's where he lived."

And yet, his reputation, in the world outside, was that of a bloodthirsty killer, who, once out of jail, would stalk over the county, ravaging death like a Hun. And so, whenever the whistle blew, on the chance that it might be Robb, the human wolf, men soberly kissed their wives, ordered them to lock doors and windows, and, with loaded rifles, joined the rush toward town.

Still standing under the bridge and listening, the older of the two men shook his head.

"Too soon. In an hour it 'ud be dark," he mused. He glanced up at the bridge planking. "They can see through the cracks—and, anyhow, they'll spot us from up the bank——"

Collins smiled dryly. "I suppose we might swim for it—under water?"

"Ketch ye in a minnit," growled the other. "Ripples. . . . Ef 'twas only darker—"

The expression of tense perplexity on his lean, furrowed features merging into furious bitterness, he whirled to Collins.

"That's your work, you stool!" he snarled. "You squealed to Jolliet before we ever cracked out of stir. He wouldn't have found out before roll-call, himself. You skunk, I'll choke you where you stand—"

"Did you notice how that driver slowed down at the bridge?" Collins's caustic tones cut into the other's angry mutterings. "If he hadn't, you couldn't have struck the middle of the river within fifty feet. Well, I was responsible for that. I gave him a hundred bucks to pull up there. Didn't know that, did you? Does that look as if I was a stool, you idiot?"

A look of astonished incredulity swept the other's face.

"Like hell you did! A hundred bucks—where did you get that, in stir?"

The thin young man shrugged his shoulders. "Money is the easiest thing in the world to get," he answered scornfully. "Never mind that. It shows that I'm on the level, though, doesn't it?"

"It does not," gritted back the other. "What it shows is that you're one of Jolliet's snakes—"

He broke off suddenly.

Collins, who had been peering around, touched the older man on the shoulder and pointed up and backward. The space between the flat of the flooring and the curve of the bank, some seven or so feet high at the water's edge, narrowed to a wedge-shaped crevice, scarcely ten inches from top to bottom at the extreme end, where the bridge met the land.

"With all this wet, we won't leave any scent for the dogs," whispered Collins. "Jolliet'll never think to flash a light in under here. And even if he does, it's our last chance."

The bite of anger on the older man's haggard, deep-furrowed features gave way a little to puzzled astonishment as he stood staring at Collins.

"Go ahead—up in front of me," he ordered grimly, after a moment. "I'll try it out. I don't quite follow your game, youngster, I'll admit. But get this—if Jolliet's bloodhounds ever put their snouts down here, I'll get you before they get me—savvy?"

Without answering, Collins scrambled up the stony bank. The other followed close behind. They reached the

apex of the wedge, and jammed themselves back like rats into the last tight inch of space. Head to head, they lay crosswise of the rough timbers that scraped their backs, and by twisting their necks could peer out sidewise over the curve of the bank as it sloped down to the black, stagnant water.

They had hardly settled themselves there when an automobile, with a snort and a scream of brakes, ground down to a halt over their heads. A jumble of footsteps and excited voices drifted down.

The most prominent among these was the high, throaty treble of a man who seemed to be trying to advertise his importance by shouting out orders to everyone at once.

"Pull the car back there off of the bridge, Steve," he shrilled out fussily. "Down here with those dogs, Hobart, not over there—damn it, man, don't let them run all over everywhere like that! Here, all you men that haven't got business here, keep off of that bridge. You'll spoil the scent, if there is any left. Where are those clothes, Grey? Lucky he left a lot he'd just been wearing—"

The treble stream broke off, only to begin again an instant later in a tone of even more pompous importance.

"I picked out this place to start in, Governor," it orated, "because it was evident from the first that they had escaped on that motor truck, and of course they will strike for the water. They will wade in it a short distance and then go ashore. We will find them hiding in some of those bushes along the bank.

"For your own safety, Governor, I must advise you to stay back here in the car. This man Robb stops at nothing, you know—at literally nothing. He will kill on sight—"

"I didn't think he looked so very fierce, yesterday," broke in the faintly amused tones of another man. "And if I am coming out on this hunt, I am certainly going to see it through. He hasn't anything to shoot with, anyway, Jolliet. And I don't believe they got off here—most likely they went on to town. But start up those dogs of yours—I've heard so much, I want to see them in action. First place you better send them is down under this bridge. There may be some hole they could crawl into—"

The Governor's voice broke off. There was the sound of consultation in abruptly whispered voices. Suddenly Peter Robb's hand shot out. Collins felt its fingers, lean and murderous as tiger's claws, vising about his windpipe.

Scraping and sliding in the loose gravel, two men were scrambling down the bank toward the river.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN HUNT

WARDEN JOLLIET had no idea, when he put Peter Robb in the corner cell opposite the window that he was indirectly bringing to pass his escape from prison.

Jolliet's reason for locking his famous prisoner in that particular cell was wholly selfish.

Through the window, forty feet distant across the open space that separated the three-tiered block of steel cages from the outer prison wall, Robb, by standing on his tiptoes, could just manage to look out.

His slice of vision, like a panel painting seen behind bars, revealed a strip of green grass in the yard, a corner of a flower bed vivid with geraniums, a fountain, a stretch of driveway, the granite cornice of Wing B, and then the mountains, piling up jagged crests, purple-hazed, like the back-drop of a stage setting, a hundred miles to the north across the valley floor.

And the mountains seemed to fascinate Robb. They were the hills where he had lived and fought and had all his adventures, and where, eventually, he had been caught. Among them was

Valley City, his native town. By the hour, a mingling of sadness and longing straining his gaunt features, he would hang to his bars, staring out at them.

He was always there when the six-thirty gong extracted a chorus of grunts and yawns from his comrades up and down the line. And he was usually to be found there, too, when visiting days brought knots of gawking country folk, who nudged each other as they stared up at him and muttered disappointedly, "So that's him, hey—Peter Robb? Wa-a-al-l, I never would 'a' thought—"

And Robb was likewise at his post when the reporters dropped in to interview him. It made No. 1 sob stuff for the Sunday howlers—"Peter Robb, world's most noted desperado, pining with homesickness, eats heart out gazing through cell window at native mountains—"

And so Jolliet, who had put Robb in the corner cell to obtain the publicity which puffed up his gloating little soul with vanity, discovered suddenly that the human tiger was sick—sick with home-hunger for the mountains—whereat Jolliet smiled softly and rubbed his hands. Jolliet was that kind of a man.

As for this homesickness driving Robb to make some desperate effort to escape, Jolliet sneered derisively. "Jest as easy stick a toothpick through a steel plate—"

Purposely, in Robb's hearing, Jolliet had discussed the matter the day before when Governor Spaulding, who was passing through town on a trip, drove over to inspect the prison.

"I wish he'd try it, Governor—really, I do," had chuckled the little man. "I've been five years training my dogs—he wouldn't get two miles before they'd pull him down. Then a stretch in the cage—it would be a good lesson for the others—"

The Governor said nothing for a moment, then remarked, confidentially:

"We may have another big crook for you to take care of here before long, Jolliet. Jim Stanley—you probably know him better by his nickname, Chicago Red—who has been doing so much damage with his gang back there in the mountains, is pretty well surrounded, I hear. There's a special lot of Pinkertons and two posses after them, and they can't last long."

Jolliet nodded sagely.

"I've heard of it." He glanced up at the corner cage. "Robb, there, was a pal of his—did you know that? We almost got Red the time we nailed Pete. They used to work together."

The Governor looked up, surprised. "I thought Robb always worked alone?" he objected. "That was why it was so hard to catch him—"

Jolliet nodded carelessly. As a matter of fact, he knew less than nothing about the case, and was merely indulging in big talk to impress the Governor.

"Sometimes," he murmured. "They were pals, though—made a great pair, I tell you, working double."

The Governor nodded and reached out his hand to Jolliet.

"I should say so!" he exclaimed. "Hate to see them both out together again, wouldn't you? Well, we've got one, we'll soon have the other for you to take care of."

At the door, the Governor turned.

"Well, good-bye, Jolliet," he said. "You've got a fine place here, and doing a good job. I won't forget you."

If Jolliet had not stood so long with fatuous smiles curving his weak, womanish lips at the Governor's praise, he might have seen the wrench of expression, bitter as a wolf's snarl, that convulsed Peter Robb's face at the Governor's mention of the capture of Chicago Red.

The cell of Collins, the trusty, was right across the corridor, and over his white, usually impassive features, a sudden flicker of excitement tightened and passed.

When Jolliet looked up, Robb, clutching the bars, was staring at the mountains, and Collins, an aimless pucker

on his forehead, was teasing a pet cockroach to jump a crack.

It was a few hours later, as Collins fell into his place behind Robb in the long queue shuffling to the dining-room, that he told him in an all but soundless whisper that they would pull off the escape next day. Their plans had long been laid; it only waited the hour when, in Collins's judgment, conditions were right to insure success.

There was nothing unique about the method of their departure. It has been used scores of times, and will continue, with variations, to be used.

Robb and Collins worked in the shoe shop. Twice a week a motor truck came to take shipments of shoe cases to the railroad station at Prisonville, three miles distant across the river.

Different men helped in getting the heavy boxes loaded on. Collins, as trusty, was responsible for the job.

When the truck backed up to the loading platform the next afternoon he directed Robb to get on to it and stow the cases back as they were trundled across the gangplank by the other men.

Instead of packing them tightly, Robb left a space between two near the rear and piled others on top and on both sides of it, making a little crevice, perhaps a foot wide, between a row of boxes and the side of the truck.

When the last box was being loaded on, Collins saw that Robb had disappeared. He got aboard the load and clambered up over the cases as if to look for him. And at that instant, the truck started with a jerk and went roaring out of the yard.

Before it had left the shelter of the factory, Collins had disappeared. The chauffeur put on speed as they approached the outer gate, and went through in a cloud of dust, waving his hand as usual to the guard.

It had been agreed between Robb and Collins that Robb should jump off at the river and hide under the bridge, but that Collins should ride on as far as the city of Prisonville, and take shelter till dark in an abandoned house that he knew of on the outskirts.

But Collins had jumped when Robb did, and climbed out of the water at his very elbow. And as Robb lay face down in the dank slime of the rathole under the bridge and listened to the treble ranting of Jolliet, all the suspicions that he had cherished of Collins came rushing back in a black and damning tide of certainties.

Why should Collins, a trusty, have come to him with the proposition that they escape together? Why should he have taken all that trouble to pull it off successfully? There was nothing in it for him—he could have gone just as well alone, whenever he wanted to.

Strangest of all, why should he have paid the chauffeur a hundred dollars to slow up at the bridge on his, Robb's, account, when he could have gone right on to town, himself, for nothing, and let Robb take his own chances when he jumped? How did he get the roll, in stir? Why had he picked out Robb, of all his mates, to befriend?

There was only the one answer to cover all of these questions: Collins was a stool, a tec, working for Jolliet. The escape had been a cooked-up job—otherwise it never would have gone off so smoothly—between him and the warden. He was to help Robb to get out, and then the dogs were to hunt him down and drag him back.

That would be a great feather in Jolliet's cap. The newspapers would write it up, and, moreover, it would give Jolliet an excuse to throw Rob into the black hole for an indefinite time. And to see the famous desperado languishing in solitary on bread and water would probably tickle his ratty little soul more than anything else in the world—except the publicity of the newspapers.

Robb reached out and his lean fingers knitted about the neck of Collins as the feet of the two men came crunching down the bank. Framed—by Collins, for Jolliet's fun—

He had ten seconds, and ten seconds would be enough—

His fingers halted, relaxed. The men were standing at the water's edge, peering straight up at them. They were less than twenty feet away, but it was evident that, coming from the bright light above, they could see nothing in the black corner.

One of them leaned forward and poked back in the hole with a long pole. It hit the beams over Robb's head and scuffed in the stones under his nose, but it did not touch his body, whose yielding softness would have betrayed him instantly.

With a soft clattering of pebbles, three of Jolliet's bloodhounds wandered down to the men's side. They lapped at the water, sniffed at the clothes that the man held out to them, and stood looking and whining up into the men's faces. In a moment they turned, and, obeying the calls of other men along the bank, trotted off up the stream. The men followed.

A half hour passed. Jolliet and the Governor came running back and jumped into the car, which tore off toward town at a furious rate. A man had just driven up in a flivver shouting that the two crooks were barricaded in an empty house in the city.

In five minutes it was dead quiet overhead except for the rush of cars and wagons whirling toward town in hot excitement. The chase had shifted; nobody would stop on the bridge for the present.

Nevertheless, the men lay still. Gradually the streaks of sunlight from the cracks above died out; darkness filled the cavern under the bridge.

Two hours passed before Robb finally touched Collins on the arm.

"Now!" he breathed.

Wriggling like an eel, Collins stole out behind him. By not so much as the clatter of a pebble did their progress over the muddy, stone-covered bank advertise itself.

At the water's edge they paused and stood a moment like statues, listening.

From a mile or so toward town, a chorus of shouts and cries, the crack of rifles and the hoarse baying of dogs came swelling on a gust of breeze.

Collins felt Robb, standing at his shoulder, stiffen suddenly.

The next instant the vague figure at his side had vanished. There was no sound, yet he knew that Robb had stepped into the stream. A whispering swirl about his ears as he followed showed him the direction—up.

Diving silently as a water-rat, he followed in long, driving strokes, deep under water.

Collins swam till his lungs were bursting, then rose to the surface. As he did so, his hand touched Robb, also up for air.

They floated on their backs, breathing deeply. Then they slipped under and swam again.

When they had gotten a hundred yards or so from the bridge, they no longer went below, but swam on the surface, a few feet apart, in slow, noiseless strokes.

Presently Collins saw that Robb was pulling in toward the bank, and followed. When he stepped out from the water, Robb was standing, shivering slightly, in the night air, under a tree.

The desperado put his mouth to Collins's ear.

"There's an old man lives up in here with his wife—used to, five years ago," he whispered. "I aim to pay 'em a little visit—"

"I'm on," whispered back Collins through chattering teeth. "Go ahead—"

A minute later, as he followed the vague blot of blackness that was Robb's figure up the grass-grown path from the stream, the outlines of a house standing solitary in a little clearing suddenly were blocked out against the stars.

Robb whispered back to Collins to wait and then cat-footed out of sight.

A long five minutes dragged. Then, without the slighest sound to indicate

that the bandit had returned, his whisper sounded in Collins's ear.

"There ain't anyone in there, I don't believe—not the old man, anyway. The door's unlocked. But there's a dog inside—I heard him growl. What say now—are you game?"

For answer, Collins pushed around Robb and led the way toward the house.

Groping over the house-side, he found the door. The latch rose under his thumb, the door swung open an inch.

Grateful warmth smote him in the face; the odors of clothes, furniture and cooked food. At the same instant he was aware of slow, scratchy steps approaching across the floor. There sounded the rasping mutter of a big dog.

Collins threw the door open and stepped inside. The mutter roughened into a snarl. There was a sudden rush and Collins went over backward under the impact of a huge, furry body whose hot breath beat in his face.

His hands fumbling desperately at the creature's windpipe, Collins rolled over and over with the huge animal on the floor. He was aware, vaguely, that Robb had found matches and lighted a candle; that he had seized a stick of wood from the pile by the stove and stood, watching his chance to strike.

Furious with blood-lust, the dog fought for Collins's face. His arms, fast weakening, ached to numbness with the strain of holding the brute off.

With a savage snarl, the animal suddenly wrenched himself loose from Collins's grip. He stood poised an instant, then with a roar flung himself at Collins's throat.

Collins had one glimpse of his hungry mouth, with red jowls drawn back tightly from the glistening teeth, plunging down at him, and threw his arms up over his face. He felt the teeth tearing at his clothes and the hot saliva dripping on his cheeks.

Then there was the sound of a blow. The huge body fell on Collins and rolled limply off to one side. Looking up, Collins saw Robb standing above him, a blood-stained club in his hand.

Collins staggered unsteadily to his feet, to meet Robb's gaze fixed on him with a quizzical expression, half admiration and half surprise.

But whatever might have been the bandit's thoughts. he remarked, merely:

"All right, Collins—you done fine. Close call—I couldn't hit till he kep' still, for fear of gettin' you, instead."

He waved his hand at the room.

"There ain't nobody here, a-tall. The old lady must of faded out sense I was around last, and his nibs is out with the bunch, lookin' fer us. We'll take what we want, but we got to make it fast—some nosey hick is dead liable to drop in with a shotgun 'most any minnit—"

Working rapidly, Robb and Collins stripped off their prison clothes and put on shirts, coats and trousers that they rummaged from the farmer's stock on the hooks about the single room that made up the dwelling.

At the table they ate ravenously, filling their pockets, when they had finished, with everything portable that was left.

Robb hunted up an empty bottle, with cork, out of the litter at the bottom of a drawer and filled it with matches from the tin box behind the stove.

As he thrust it in his pocket, he glanced at Collins. Now himself again, the trusty sat, hands in pockets, tilted back in his chair by the table, watching Robb out of level and strangely cold grey eyes.

Robb sent back the look in a long, even stare. He buttoned the farmer's baggy coat thoughtfuly around his lean figure and took a half dozen steps toward the door.

At the threshold he paused and looked around. A sudden, ominous suspense sang like wires in the cabin.

"Well, here's where we split, Collins," announced Robb decidedly at last. "I've let you dog along after me so far

—now, I'm a-goin' where I started for. Where you aimin' to head out for?"

The ghost of a smile stirred Collins's thin white lips.

"It's immaterial to me, pardner," he murmured. "Anywhere at all—the same as you."

Peter Robb's face darkened a shade and took on a vaguely humorous twist. To one who knew him, that abrupt softening was a danger flag—the more silky-smooth Robb grew, the further away it immediately became wise to stand.

"I reckon not, Collins," drawled Robb in a voice of whispering gentleness, which nevertheless stung like a whip lash as it came from between his rigid lips.

"You pore damn coyote, haven't you got no friends, nowhere, that you can tie up to?" he jeered. "Have I got to wring yore neck right as you set there to get rid of you?"

Collins's cool grin widened.

"For the present, your friends will be mine, Robb," he smiled.

His steel eyes studied the bandit.

"Including Chicago Red," he added after a moment.

Like a rattlesnake poised for a leap, Robb stiffened suddenly from head to foot. A wrench of fury froze his face in iron lines.

Smoothly as a rattler, again, he glided across the floor to where Collins sat. His lean fingers, like eagles' talons, whipped out and vised Collins's shoulder.

"What do you mean by that?" he hissed. "What do *you* know about Red?"

Still teetering back in his chair, Collins laughed up into the bandit's eyes—but the laugh was cold as the clattering of ice in a glass.

"Why, nothing," he drawled deliberately. "Except that I heard Jolliet telling the Governor that Red was a pal of yours, and almost sewed up, there in the mountains that you're so fond of looking at. So I thought likely you'd be heading up there to tip him off. Why, what's the matter? Wasn't Red a pal of yours?"

It was all at once dead silent in the little room. As the two men stared at each other a tension like an electric current of a million volts seemed about to break out in a shattering crash.

Robb straightened slightly, his thin lips flickered in a sneer.

"You liar!" he hissed. "You—"

The sentence was never finished. From over by the stove had come a clattering sound. It was the great dog that Robb's blow had stunned, coming to himself and struggling to get onto his feet.

Robb turned quickly, picked up the club, and, with another blow, knocked him into insensibility again.

At that instant a curious thing occurred. In his struggles, the dog had moved aside a little from the spot where he had been lying. In the space thus exposed to view, Robb suddenly saw a piece of paper on the floor.

Still back to Collins, he stooped swiftly and picked it up. Under pretense of examining the dog, he unfolded the single crease and swept his glance hurriedly over the scribbled message that it bore. With a convulsive grip, he crushed the paper in his hand.

When he turned to Collins again, the black rage that had knotted his face a moment back was gone. In its place, a curious smile fluttered around the corners of his lips. He nodded at the dog.

"A minute more, and he'd been makin' breakfast outen us again," he muttered mildly. "I didn't croak him, though. I hate to kill dogs—they're whiter than men—most men. . . .

"As fer you, pardner, I guess I change my mind. I kinda forgot about this here animule a minnit back. In considerin' of the neat work you done with him, I reckon we travel along together fer a while."

Without a word, Collins pushed back his chair and got up. He was looking, not at Robb's mouth, smile-wreathed,

but into the bottoms of his black eyes, where all the venom that had left his face seemed to have drained into two glittering pools of black malignancy.

As he followed Robb toward the door, he managed to pick up, under pretense of throwing them one side, the wet prison clothes that he had stripped off. His fingers swept them hurriedly but thoroughly.

As he tossed them down again, a flash of dismay flitted over his face. Rapidly his eyes swept the floor.

Turning at the door, Robb caught both the look of amaze and the searching glance, and smiled.

"Lost something, pardner?" he drawled in mock solicitude. "Want I should hold the candle while ye hunt?"

Collins grunted a dry laugh.

"No, never mind, now, Robb," he said. "Go ahead. I'm with you, all the way."

"Sure, you bet you are," murmured back Robb as he undid the door. "All the way—"

In front of the old house, on the edge of the little clearing, the men paused. There was no moon; the stars gave light enough to make out trees, the shape of houses. Three miles distant, to the east, lay Prisonville. At their backs, to the south, was the river. Ahead, a hundred miles to the north, across the valley, lay the mountains and Valley City. Paralleling the direction that they would take to walk there, running almost in a straight line from Prisonville, was the railroad.

Robb moved ahead.

They felt their way through the thin belt of trees surrounding the house and clearing, and came to an open field of some sort of early grain, which clung, wet and swathing, about their ankles and made loud, ripping sounds as they tore their boots through it.

From different directions came the shouts of men, the baying of dogs and the rapid-fire whir of automobiles. The white beam of the searchlight on the tower of the prison was sweeping around and around, hitting here and there, a shifting, murderous finger of accusing light. For miles in every direction, Prisonville and Jolliet were out on their man-hunt.

Stepping with cat-like caution, Peter Robb started across the big field, guiding his course by a star that hung like a huge jewel high in the sky.

CHAPTER III

A WILDCAT ENGINE

THE next morning, in every store and gathering-place in Prison County, there was but one topic of conversation—the same that featured in black headlines on the front page of every daily paper in North America.

Peter Robb, the famous lone-wolf bandit, had again broken jail, this time with a companion, and, with all the uncanny skill that had made him famous, had succeeded in slipping through a supposedly squirrel-tight cordon of men and dogs that had been thrown around Prisonville within an hour of his escape.

After feeding and leaving their prison clothes at the shack of the hermit recluse Jason Hewes, he and his pal, it appeared, had tramped a path a yard wide through the old man's alfalfa patch to the road, crossed it under the nose of half a hundred watchers, hit open country on the other side and gone on for a couple of miles before they came to the house of Hiram Beebe.

Beebe had taken his rifle out on the hunt, leaving a pair of pistols for his wife to protect herself with.

While his pal had watched outside, Robb had forced the kitchen door, stolen upstairs, gathered the guns up from the table as the woman lay dozing and covered her with them.

At his orders she had put up a luncheon, done her husband's only two suits into a bundle and filled Robb's pockets with cartridges for the revolvers. He had bidden her good night, apologized

for frightening her, and vanished.

The pair had then gone on more rapidly, but not rapidly enough. About three o'clock, the bloodhounds, which had picked up the trail—very faint because the two fugitives had twice changed their clothes—at midnight, began to close up on them five miles further north. There were more than two hundred men and boys, with Jolliet and Sheriff Kroll in the lead, some quarter of a mile behind the dogs, whose baying was momentarily growing more excited.

Suddenly a pair of shots rang out and the baying stopped. Jolliet and the sheriff gave orders for the posse to spread out, fanwise, to cover the Lincoln ranch, which was just ahead, and trap Robb among the buildings.

With some of the cooler men, Jolliet pushed on straight toward the ranch, while Kroll led the circle around it in a wide detour to the west. The ranch buildings, a hundred yards in front, were ablaze with light.

All at once, a man in the lead let out a yell and bawled for the others to hurry up.

In front of them, at the foot of a little knoll, lay the dogs.

Jolliet frothed torrents of shrill blasphemy when he saw the dead bodies of his thoroughbreds.

"Where'd he get a gun, damn him!" he shrieked in his furious treble. "I'll make the —— pay for this—"

Lincoln, owner of the ranch, came running out.

"Any luck, Mr. Jolliet?" he shouted.

"This." Jolliet poked the dead animals with his foot. "He got my dogs just now."

"Then he can't be far off," said Lincoln. "Come on, men—spread out and find him. I'll have my boys go through the buildings. No quarter, you know, men—shoot to kill."

Jolliet stayed back talking with Lincoln, while the crowd scattered around the ranch buildings.

"Come up to the house a minute and have a cup of coffee while they turn him out," Lincoln invited. "You look used up, Jolliet."

"Well—I don't care if I do," said Jolliet, swallowing nervously and looking around. None of his men were in sight to notice his desertion. "I'm played out, that's a fact. Been on the go since dark—"

Halfway to the house they passed under the deep shadow of a group of cottonwoods. Jolliet felt a chill like a lump of ice sliding down his spine as a hard snout gouged into his back and a well-known voice snapped curtly, "Stick 'em up, Jolliet—way up."

"I—" blurted Jolliet.

"And keep quiet—and be quick," ordered Robb smoothly. "If not, there's other ways.

"Collins, you put Mr. Lincoln there in that shed and lock the door. There used to be a padlock on it. And if you like ham and eggs for breakfast, Lincoln, don't peep a word till we've checked out—"

With a deft turn on his wrist, Collins snapped the padlock through the hasp of the shed door where, at the point of the other gun, he had shoved the ranch owner and ran after Robb and Jolliet.

The main road, cutting across the prairie, went close past Lincoln's house, and in front of it, Jolliet's automobile, driven out from town by one of the keepers, was waiting for him.

"That little bus of yours over there, Warden, was just ordered for this, I reckon," Robb was saying. "I'll give you just thirty seconds to get her started, headed *from* town—"

WARDEN Jolliet was found at dawn, trussed like a turkey and foaming with rage, but unhurt, in the bushes alongside the road just outside the village of Staples, thirty miles north.

Long before that, phone messages from the ranch had spread the warning ahead, and every foot of the country for miles on either side of the railroad was being patrolled.

There was no chance in the world that Peter Robb could break through this line, and even if he did, with the excitement at fever heat, every house a fort and every man a walking arsenal, he would never make the seventy miles to the hills—so the papers said.

CHAPTER IV

"AND WAS THERE A GIRL?"

COLLINS opened his eyes suddenly, sat up stiffly and looked around.

It was perfectly still. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun threw long shadows of foliage and underbrush across the grassy bottom of the little clearing. On all sides the lofty trunks of huge trees reached into the sky.

Seated on a flat stone twenty feet away, Peter Robb was regarding him with a strange expression of curiosity and suspicion, mixed.

The moment that Collins's eyes opened, the look vanished from Robb's face.

"Howdy, pardner!" he hailed genially. "You sure snoozed like a baby. I was jest thinkin' of callin' ye. It's most time to pull out again."

Collins remembered. The sky had already been greying into early dawn when they left the warden, tied with his own tow-rope, by the wayside. At a space-devouring dog-trot that never wavered, Robb had set the pace for three killing miles across country into a chopped-up mass of foot-hills that clustered around the bases of a mountain range to the west.

In the thinning edge of dawn they had dodged around cabins and ploughed fields, into the mouth of a long gully winding between dizzy, wooded slopes. A sugar-loaf of granite, bearded with a stubble of evergreens, stood on the right. Robb had turned off; by a path level as the side of a house, known, as he grunted, only to him, they had toiled up over cliffs and ledges.

The sun was beating down with furnace-like intensity when they finally came out on the summit. Animal-like, they had bolted food and flung themselves down under trees to sleep.

For ten straight hours they had slumbered; now, as dark approached again, they ate heartily of the lunch that Mrs. Beebe had put up and drank from the ice-cold spring that welled up a little way off under the trees.

Finally Robb broke the silence. For a long minute he had sat studying Collins out of beadily black, cold eyes.

"Collins, hey?" he mused, deliberately. "Don't know as I ever heard that moniker before, pal. What did they get you for?"

"Stick-up job in Centerville," replied Collins, meeting the look easily. "Hotel cashier. I nailed the poke, all O.K., but somebody tripped me on the getaway and a couple of men jumped me before I could wiggle."

Robb nodded slowly. "Hard luck. . . . That your regular line?"

"Mostly. I do a safe job now and then if I hear of a good one, but they're too much trouble—too much junk to lug around with you," answered Collins. "The good old stick-up for me—here you come and there you go."

Robb nodded again, thoughtfully. "Same here, pardner—I always felt that way. . . ." His eyes, which had dropped to the ground as he slowly broke off a twig, snapped up suddenly again to Collins's.

"I was just wonderin' if you ever happened to run across any of the boys I used to know?" he drawled, blandly curious. "There was quite a few of 'em I spoke to when we met up. Jest name over a few you know, Mister Collins."

Quiet as Robb's voice was, there was no escaping the challenge in the gently murmured words—a challenge all the more sinister because of the smouldering irony in the sooty eyes and the nervous fluttering of the bandit's fingers around the handle of his gun.

Collins laughed. To a man of subtler

perceptions than Robb, the laugh might have sounded forced. But even he noticed that Collins's fingers strayed mechanically to a pocket for cigarettes that were not there.

"Why, sure," chuckled Collins, still evidently amused. "There was Tom Silva, for one. I met him in Denver three years ago, just before they got him for that Second National job. . . . And then Bill Homsi. Bill was a great lad for the girls, and that finished him. There was a skirt in Omaha that squealed—"

"Sure—I know all about Bill," interrupted Robb impatiently. "Go ahead—who else?"

The steel grey eyes of Collins flickered across the inky pools of fire that were Robb's.

"Anyone would almost think that I was getting the third degree, wouldn't they?" he murmured dryly. "Who else—let's see. . . . Big Jake Stone, for one. You must have known him—he worked out this way. And that pal of his—Slim Thompson—"

"Sure—I knew both of them," remarked Robb. "How about Evans—Swede Evans? Ever meet up with him, Collins?"

There was an almost imperceptible wait—the fifth part of a thin second, possibly—before Collins answered.

"Evans? Oh, sure. We pulled a job together out in Frisco."

Robb nodded. "I believe you said, a while back, that you worked with Tom Silva once. About how long ago was that, if you happen to remember?"

"Two years," replied Collins instantly. "In Kansas City—"

A curious smile curving his thin lips, Peter Robb got up and held out his hand to Collins. "Pardner, put her there!" he exclaimed. "I admit I wan't quite plumb shore of ye at first, but I got to take it back. I know all those boys you mentioned, and I know about 'em, too. Yore shore all right—"

The men's hands gripped. Suddenly Robb burst out laughing.

"You seem to know most everybody—I wonder if you ever happened to run acrost my old friend Chicago Red?" he exclaimed.

Collins shook his head. "I work alone, or with one pal—Red plays with a mob," he said. "I never got within miles of him."

Robb nodded. "I kind o' thought so. . . . What give ye the notion, back there, that I would be headin' out toward him, now?"

"Why, nothing," replied Collins, "except that as I said, I knew you and Red were pals, and I figured that, you knowing he was in a bad fix, you might see what you could do to help him out."

The curious smile around Robb's lips seemed to deepen.

"Now, what made you think that him and me were pals, I wonder?" he murmured presently.

Collins looked up, surprised.

"Why, everybody who knows anything knows that," he exclaimed. "Weren't you two boys together back in Valley City? Didn't you chum along till you were eighteen or twenty and left home, the same day? Didn't you pull your first job together, back there, and skip when the cops got after you? There was even some story of a girl you both were sweet on—but she didn't make any trouble between a pair of pals like you, of course. Mean to tell me that isn't all true, Robb?"

The smile that had stolen over Robb's face during Collins's story had frozen in iron lines by the time the younger man had finished, but the light of memory in his eyes was soft as his voice.

"Valley City—sure," he murmured gently. "Boys there together, just as you say, Collins. Our houses backed up on the same empty lot. We were the same age. We pulled our first job together, too. And we skipped when the cops got after us. . . . A prime little town, Valley City. I've never been back there since, Collins. I could have gone in and pulled a hundred jobs,

but I didn't. I sure set a heap of store by that home town, boy—"

"And was there a girl?" said Collins.

Robb nodded. "There was. I've never seen her either. . . . Thirty years. . . ."

"But you saw Red again," went on Collins. "You and he worked together, some. You were in the same cabin the night they got you, five years ago. Red had just gone out, or they would have nailed him, too. He did all he could, outside, but it was no go. Is it any wonder that I expected you might go back there to help him, now he's in a hole?"

For a moment Robb did not speak. The iron anger that had gripped his face had now frozen his eyes as well, which glared out from under his shaggy brows with an expression of murderous rage.

"You liar!" he snarled at Collins suddenly. "You yellow, snivelin' skunk! You—"

"Another thing I thought of," broke in Collins coolly, "the three of us might get together and pull something. There's plenty of good cribs that are yelling to be cracked up there, and if we went in cahoots we'd sure give the cops something to think of for a while—hey, Robb?"

The rage on Robb's face faded into astonishment, and that quickened into interest. Without answering a word, he sank down on a stone, his linked hands gripping a knee, his face knitted in thought.

For close to fifteen minutes, Collins sat at the foot of his rock, watching the play of expression on Robb's face. His suggestion seemed to have not only surprised and startled the bandit, but for some reason to be also hugely amusing to him. Flashes of red anger alternated with gleams of ironic mirth on his lean features.

Finally, without making any answer whatever to Collins's remark, he got up and stood looking off over the trees up the long valley which stretched mile after mile into the gathering darkness toward the north.

"Ef we aim to git anywheres tonight, we'd better be a-slidin' down off of this here mounting," he announced mildly. "It's liable to be plumb onpleasant walkin' down over them cliffs and ledges after dark."

Collins nodded and got up. Robb leading, they clattered and scrambled the rough two miles to the bottom. The stars were twinkling when they came onto the comparative level of the valley floor again.

Three miles ahead, as Robb had told Collins on the way down the mountain, their destination lay—the freight yards at the little tank town of Stony Brook.

"There's a through freight for the North pulls out about midnight," had declared Robb. "Used to, anyhow—"

Slipping like ghosts through the thicket of trees that ringed the yard, they found the engine panting and wheezing as it took water.

In the strident roar of the exhaust there was little need for quiet as, just inside the last line of trees, they ran fifty feet back toward the rear. They crawled under a car and swarmed up on the brake beams.

A moment later the whistles shrieked and there was a crash of coupling irons down the length of the train.

The grim murmur of Peter Robb came to Collins's ears as it picked up speed.

"Hang on good, pard, and lots of luck—this is sure goin' to be one taste of hell," he prophesied with a grim chuckle.

About the hour that the papers carrying the prediction that Robb could not possibly pierce the cordon that had been drawn around him were being put out on the streets by newsboys, a freight train pulled into the yard at Canyon, fifty miles dead north of Staples. It was bright daylight. Contrary to the practice of five years ago, the train had omitted to stop at Pinnacle, ten miles back, for water, but,

just before dawn, had roared through the little place in a cloud of dust.

Glancing back from his precarious anchorage on the brake beam, Collins had got, in the last half hour, between dust storms, glimpses of Robb's face, tense with anxious thought. He knew that it had been Robb's plan to drop off at Pinnacle while it was still dark, and hide in the vicinity during the day. And it required no very vivid imagination to picture the results when they should make their appearance in broad daylight in the busy yards at Canyon.

With a roar of steam, the long train jerked down to a halt. The crew began dropping off; the network of tracks was alive with cars, engines and yard hands.

Out from under a car near the middle of the train dropped two individuals, dust-covered and bleary-eyed, their faces black with grime and pocked with red scars from flying cinders. They stood peering around uncertainly, wavering as if drunk with dizzy weariness.

A yard policeman, relishing the prospect of an early morning set-to with a pair of bums, loafed up to them grinning, his thumbs stuck in his belt. He stopped, bent, looked for one second into the eyes of the shorter of the men, jumped three feet backward and yelled, "Peter Robb, by God!" With the same motion he whipped out his gun.

Comparatively speaking, it had been hours since Robb's gun had leaped, apparently from nowhere, into his hand. His first shot broke the policeman's wrist; the second, through the leg, dropped him to the ground.

There was an instant's pause. Then, from all around, came shouts. From all directions men swarmed through the yard, climbing over the high fence, crawling under and between the cars, running up from the street crossing a hundred yards back.

Like a wolf-cry the yell went up: "It's Robb—they've got him, down in the freight yard—"

The crowd thickened as if by magic. Within thirty seconds Robb and Collins were in the center of a snarling ring of five hundred men and boys, who circled and jostled and spat curses, all pushing and crowding in to see, but keeping safely back from the two weary-faced men who, pistols in hand, stood at bay in the middle like cornered wolves.

Two men with rifles started climbing telegraph poles on opposite sides of the yard. The crowd cheered. Their guns flashed up, both drawing on Robb. At the same instant three men, with drawn revolvers, broke out of the ring in front and charged down, shouting and shooting steady streams.

In the tumult of yelling and excitement, only a few of the cooler spectators realized the smooth efficiency with which Robb and Collins handled the crisis. Without leaving his hip, the gun of the tall, slim man with the white face barked twice, to right and left, and the rifles of the men on the telegraph poles clattered down out of their shattered hands.

One by one, like pins bowled off of their feet, the other three went flying in loose heaps over the rails. And here, Robb's cool skill was never so deliberate—not through the heart, but through leg or arm, went all his shots. And so, if he were eventually captured, there would be no capital charge to face—

The cheering stopped. A groan, swelling into a gasp of fear, at sight of the tumbling forms, rose from the crowd in front.

In the rear, however, the yells, hot with blood-lust, jeered out again. "Go get him! Kill him!" Stray slugs whined over the fugitives' heads. From down the street came the long, shrieking howl of the siren whistle on the police auto.

Robb whirled around and sent a shower of shots over the heads of the mob, making them duck like grass before a breeze. He swept his eyes around and yelled at Collins.

Ten feet distant, on the next track, an express locomotive, left empty by the crew, stood blowing off steam.

In the same instant that he shouted to Collins Robb jumped for the cab.

With a howl of "Stop him!" the crowd surged ahead. Guns rattled like fire-crackers, bullets caromed off the steel roof of the cab, spurted up fountains of coal dust, tinkled out the glass in the windows.

With a muttered order to Collins, Robb yanked the throttle wide.

Not waiting for his instruction, Collins, the moment he had set foot on the engine, had climbed up on the tender, and there, lying flat behind a pile of coal, poured a steady stream of slugs back at the crowd swarming close behind as the huge machine slowly gathered speed.

Robb, from his position at the throttle, raked the steps on both side, alternately.

For a hundred feet or so, as the express engine gradually speeded up, they slipped through the yard, the crowds giving way in front of them, and keeping well back from the deadly stream of slugs that came from cab and tender.

Then Collins yelled out to Robb that the engine of the freight had been uncoupled, and, bristling with men and guns, was starting in pursuit.

"Let her come!" shouted back Robb. "In a minnit now this old girl will be a-kitin'. She can do sixty if she can one, and they won't never get in poppin' distance. Let 'em come!"

Robb's prediction proved correct. Once clear of the yard, the huge mechanism under them skimmed over the rails like a swallow. After half a mile or so, the clumsy freighter, realizing the hopelessness of the chase, gave up and limped back to town.

Collins crawled down beside Robb in the cab.

"How far to the next town?" he yelled. "They'll get us there—telephone—"

Robb nodded. "Only ten miles. But we hop off before we get there."

A mile or so further on, he began to slow down. At a bridge where a little river came brawling down out of a long gully that wound its steep, evergreen-clothed slopes back into the piling hills, he motioned Collins to get off.

As he followed him, he pulled the throttle wide open again. The two men stood for a moment by the track and watched the big engine gathering the speed that would within a few moments transform it into a wild juggernaut of destruction.

"She won't never get to town," murmured Robb as he turned toward the river. "There's a curve up here about three mile that'll ditch her. But that way, they'll have to do more or less guessin' to figger out where we struck in—no use in leavin' the enjine right here fer a guide-post, as I see."

Stepping from stone to stone so as to leave no footprints in the sand, Robb clambered down the steep slope to the bed of the stream.

"We got to do a little travelin' onless we want comp'ny," he observed over his shoulder to Collins. "Right spry travelin, too."

FROM the moment that Robb and his pal had made their spectacular exit from Canyon, observed the evening papers, the ground had swallowed them. Not a sign of their whereabouts, in spite of the all-day and all-night hunting of more than a score of posses, was obtained till the next morning, when a widow who lived alone ten miles beyond Canyon to the north was more scared than hurt by being routed out just before dawn to get breakfast for them.

On their departure they gently gagged her and tied her in a chair, from which she was not able to escape till nearly night, by which time, as she remarked and everyone agreed, they might be most anywhere.

And that was all. It was generally agreed that Robb was making a bee-

line for the mountain canyons and fastnesses where he and his pal, Chicago Red, had lived for years, and where it would be all but impossible to capture him again.

Back in Valley City, home town of Robb and Chicago Red, tremors of apprehension began to thrill the citizens. According to all reports, Robb was blazing a straight trail in their direction. Like all escaped criminals, he was showing that strange, fatal weakness that always leads to capture—the magnetic urge, drawing homeward—

The little city, with its bustling Main Street, its stores, health-resort hotel, bank and railroad station, the business and trading center for a region of more than fifty miles, was agog with tension that tightened hour by hour. Only one topic was talked of in the streets and stores. Gradually it became whispered about that the authorities had at last given up hope of intercepting the onward march of Robb and that they were quietly filling the town with men who would be prepared for anything that might happen in the playing of the final act in the drama.

It was a curious fact that of all the hundreds who stood around eagerly discussing every shred of news about Robb, not one in a thousand had ever laid eyes on him. He had not visited Valley City once since his departure with the sheriff at his heels more than twenty years before, and the present residents were almost all newcomers, brought in on the boom of rapid growth since his boyhood.

And among these, whose curious pride in the fame and exploits of the bandit was markedly less than that of the old residents, a rather more serious thought than that of his astonishing escape and approach was uppermost.

What if he should take it into his head to stick up the place before leaving it for his final break to the hills? There would be a lot of things he would need—and there was the bank, unusually well filled with cash, and none too strong, as the officials uneasily whispered to each other.

One other news item would have been better noticed but for Robb's monopoly of the front-page stuff was a half column to the effect that Chicago Red's gang of yeggs, long and fruitlessly hunted by the authorities, had been reported close in the vicinity. They had blown a post-office safe at Ladro, fifty miles west, and at Springdale they had dragged the president of the bank out of bed and prodded him with gun snouts till he had opened the safe to the tune of fifty thousand.

One or two of Valley City's citizens, sager than the rest, tapped the item and nodded gravely. Chicago Red was as well known in his way as Peter Robb in his. Instead of working alone, pulling off spectacular coups by sheer brilliancy, he traveled with a crowd, who descended on a town like Tartars, plundered and killed broadcast for half an hour and rode off, leaving a trail of death and ruin behind them.

Robb would be bad enough. But suppose Robb and Chicago Red both hit Valley City at once—working together?

CHAPTER V

"CHICAGO RED" MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

THE third night after leaving Sugar Loaf and riding the beams to Canyon, Robb and Collins made camp in a thicket of birch high up in a knife-like pass between two beetling mountain chains.

For thirty hours they had seen neither road, house, nor human being. Leaving the chase far behind, they had at last arrived in the wilderness of crags and valleys, empty and unvisited for miles on every side, where capture was impossible.

With the final outwitting of his foes, Peter Robb's spirits seemed to soar almost to jocularity. Leaning back against a boulder, his pipe—appropriated at the last ranch house that they

had held up for food and blankets—wreathing fragrant spires in his hand, he broke into raucous song.

Silent and watchful—more watchful and more silent, if anything, than when their danger was most pressing—Collins stood lounging against a tree, gazing at him thoughtfully. With the keen, level glance of his grey eyes, the young man seemed to be trying to read the outlaw's mind—and succeeding to a degree that was more or less disconcerting to him.

Robb suddenly broke off his song and fixed Collins with his black, blazing eyes.

"So ye figgered that, Chi Red bein' an old pal of mine, and sewed up by the cops, I'd likely head out toward him and give him a lift, hey?" he demanded abruptly. It was the first time since the camp on the mountain that he had referred to this, and in his voice Collins read the same ring of gloating irony that had tinctured it then.

Collins gave back the gaze coolly.

"Why not?" he countered. "You got to dig in somewhere. They'll be after you like all hell, and you and Red could work together like a pair of turtle doves—after you pull him out of his hole."

Peter Robb's face jerked into lines of anger.

"I don't suppose there's any reason why *you* want to see Red, is there?" he spat out with sudden venom. "You ain't kidding me along to take you up there, or anything?"

"I've always wanted to see Red," nodded Collins, evenly. "Sure. But I haven't been trying to make you go to him—only, as I said, I think the three of us could pull some sweet jobs if we got together. What are you driving at, anyway, with all this talk? Spit it out and get it over with."

Over Robb's face, wondering admiration mingled slowly with derision.

"I sure hand it to you, Collins," he nodded slowly. "You've got your nerve all right. . . . Well, cheer up—we're goin' in—to pull Red out of his hole, as you say."

Collins met the acid sneer in Robb's eyes without flinching.

"Fine and dandy," he murmured, stretching and stifling a yawn. "I bet we do some good work together, too."

It was well past the middle of the afternoon when Robb, who had been leading a fast pace all day, stopping only for a few minutes at noon, paused under the shadow of a jutting crag and looked around for Collins.

They had come out of a narrow defile between rocky barriers and stood on the edge of an almost circular basin of bare, flat ledges, grown up in patches with scrub spruce and fenced by a vertical wall of rock which must have been fully a thousand feet high.

But for the opening through which they had come, and another similar one barely visible across the basin, the wall swept around the complete circuit without a break.

It was a scene of rugged and naked grandeur breath-taking in its impressiveness. But the scenic beauty of the place was not what Robb appeared to be thinking of. As Collins came up behind him, he reached out a long arm and pulled him back into the shadow of the crag.

"You've maybe heard of Red's valley?" he inquired, his voice again sunk to a murmur. "Well, there it is—the beginning of it. Over across yonder, where you see that crack in the wall, is a gully with sides like a house-front, twelve hundred feet high. The valley is less than fifty feet wide, and one man could hold it against a thousand. Back in there is Chicago Red. One of his men is always on duty at the entrance. Nobody can so much as get his head inside that front walk of Red's onless he wants 'em to. We'll go over there and knock in a minnit—and you go in front—"

In the last seconds, a sudden sinister softness had sprung into Robb's voice. Collins, standing in front, was aware

that he had moved with sharp abruptness, and in the next breath realized for what purpose—as he spoke, Robb had leaned forward and twitched the revolver out of Collins's belt. Glancing over his shoulder, Collins saw that Robb held it pointed at him, a bare six inches from his back.

"We're goin' in to see Red," repeated Robb grimly, "and you go ahead—*without* yore artillery, Mister Collins. Mog along—"

Without a word, Collins obeyed. He was not surprised. On the contrary, he wondered that Robb had waited as long as he had before doing this.

They had covered scarcely ten paces through the thick scrub toward the cleft in the rock on the other side, when with a crack startling in its abruptness, a rifle went off. The bullet whined over their heads and spat against the rock.

"Red's to home," grunted Robb grimly. "That's his notice—stick up yore hands."

Suiting the action to the words, he hastily thrust his revolver in his pocket and shot his hands high above his head. The next minute he rapped out an angry oath. The moment that his gun was lowered, Collins had whirled, knocked him on his back with a swift blow and dodged out of sight into the underbrush.

Robb scrambled to his feet and stood staring around. It was dead quiet—there was no sign or sound of Collins.

Robb yanked out his revolver and started beating about the bush. The next moment, with a startled grunt, he put it away again and once more raised his hands over his head.

This time two shots, close together, had come droning over from Chicago Red's invisible guard. That was the last, peremptory warning. The next time, the guard would shoot to kill. And the marksmanship of Red's satellites was not to be trifled with.

His hands still vertical in the air, Robb stood a moment, thinking. At the end, a slow smile widened across his face. Without so much as a glance to right or left, he started across the rocky basin toward the valley entrance.

When Peter Robb came up to the narrow cleft between black, dizzy walls, two men with leveled rifles stood covering him. While one still held him covered, the other stepped forward and relieved him of his weapons.

As his hands fell to his side, the man with the rifle barked out an exclamation of amazement.

"Peter Robb, by God!" he cried. A look of puzzled incredulity knotting his features, he stood staring at the outlaw.

"I thought the state of Nevada was entertainin' you, down to friend Jolliet's brick house?" he drawled. "What did he—let you out to run up here and pay a little call?"

"Sure—sent me up with his respects for Red, and he wants him to come down and keep me comp'ny," grinned Robb. "I understand the bulls is after him, anyway? That right?"

The smile on the other's face froze. "That's what some of them say—once," he snapped. "What do you want, Robb?"

"I told ye, didn't I?" said Robb. "I want to see Red. Go tell him, Steve."

The man whom Robb addressed as Steve hesitated while the bare flicker of a smile again stirred the corners of his lips.

"All right," he answered finally. "I'd call it onhealthy like, myself—Red has a way of bein' kind o' nervous with his fingers when he gets excited, ye recollect—but you're the doctor."

He turned to the other guard.

"Fritz," introduced Steve. "Swede Fritz. Plumb gentle onless ye rile him. He can drill a dime further away than he can see it, so don't do anything sudden. The ground around here's plumb hard to dig in, and we don't like to leave meat lyin' around, it draws the crows so. You go ahead, Robb—Fritzy'll sing out the turns."

Guided by the laconic orders of the

guide, Fritz, walking always some ten feet in the rear, Robb started out on the three-mile journey up the gully.

Gradually, as they went on, the vertical walls drew apart. The rocky floor gave way to a luxurious carpet of grassy green dotted with trees, between which a crystal clear brook clattered noisily down from fall to fall. But for the sound of the water, the hum of bees, and the twittering of birds, a Sabbath stillness hovered over the place.

Suddenly, coming out from under the thick foliage where he had been walking, Robb stopped abruptly.

Straight in front, and distant perhaps a mile, a massive barrier of rock, vertical, coal-black and glistening with the seepage of innumerable springs, stretched at right angles across the valley and joined the side walls at right and left.

In the level area at the foot of the head wall were clustered a dozen or so log cabins, with horses grazing about and a group of men who stood with their hands resting on their hips and staring curiously.

Fritz grunted curtly and Robb went on. As his nearer approach made his features visible to the waiting men, a stir of excitement seemed to run through the group. A scattering of amazed exclamations came to their ears; three or four of the men turned and ran back among the cabins.

The next moment, a man stepped out of a cabin near the center of the group and walked slowly forward. He was of middle height, with skin still strangely white and untanned under the burning sun, hair the hue of blazing fire, and eyes whose flashing blue was like the sheen of ice-caverns. He moved with the lithe, supple swing of a panther, every motion suggesting the rippling strength of whip-cord muscles under the nondescript attire.

The red-haired man came up to Robb, and, hands on hips, stood looking at him for fully half a minute before he spoke. And even then it was in answer to Robb's greeting.

"Hello, Red," had laughed Robb. "Plumb tickled to death to see me, ain't you?"

By not so much as a flicker did the expression of Chicago Red's face change.

"Hello, Robb. What do you want?" he snapped. His voice was icy cold; every lineament of his features radiated wolf-like savageness. "You've got one hell of a lot of nerve—"

"You make a mistake, Red," protested Robb soothingly. "I ain't come up here lookin' for nothing—not a thing. Only I walked out o' San Antonio prison two days before yestiddy, and on the way I heered that you was bottled up here in the hills with a sheriff and half a dozen posses after ye—so I thought I'd see if I couldn't mebbe make out to give ye a little lift, one way or another—"

Red's scornful laugh cut into Robb's speech.

"Like hell you did!" he jeered. "Nobody's been after me—except you."

The white point of Chicago Red's chin jutted out the fraction of an inch.

"You come up here without bein' asked—well, then, by God, you're a-goin' to stay," he gritted after an instant's thought. "You're a-goin' to stay where there won't nobody ever have to do any worryin' about you again—"

Robb's laugh was innocent as a child's.

"There wouldn't nothing suit me better, Red," he declared. "I been wantin' to join yore outfit for a long time, that's a fact. What I said a minnit back about helpin' you out of a hole was guff, of course. But what I reely come for, I've got a big story to talk up with ye. Something I heered about down to stir. It's too big for one man, but with yore mob—"

Chicago Red turned his back.

"All right. I'll hear about it—in the morning," he grunted, a sneering smile

curving the corners of his thin lips. "After breakfast—"

A roar of laughter from the men standing about greeted this unmistakable sally of Red's. Peter Robb's face, under the pitiless scrutiny, still held evenly impassive, but his black eyes seemed to leap from their sockets at the red-haired man.

"All right, Red," he called out to his back. "After breakfast, then. And say—I'm hungry enough to eat tomato cans. Tell yore grub agent to rustle me some eats, will you—and set down with me while I massacree the same. I want to tell you about the prison down to San Antonio. You might go visitin' there some time, and you want to know yore way around—"

His blue eyes flashing with sudden rage, Red whirled in his tracks. The anger faded and a grim smile took its place.

"Well, you sure have got yore guts with you, Robb!" he muttered, half admiringly. "Damned if I don't—"

The plum-blue shadows that were creeping down from the hills over the little valley deepened to purple and from that to black as Red and Peter Robb sat facing each other over the table in the shack where Robb's supper had been brought.

The murderous hostility with which Red had greeted his strange guest had slowly merged into curiosity as they talked. Why had Robb, of all men on earth, come to his valley, he asked himself again and again. Robb was no fool —at least, he never had been, before. What was his game in coming and literally putting his head into the lion's mouth?

At last, failing to find out what he wanted, Red, with sinister frankness, began to describe to Robb his plans for his next big job. A smile wreathing his lips, Robb listened, nodding slowly, to the boastful story.

Valley City, declared Red, was soft as a ripe tomato, and about as easy to pick. It had banks, stores, hotels—a cold half million in cash, all told. The police force was nothing, there was no help within fifty miles. A mob of twenty men could stick the place up, shake it empty, and be off in an hour.

He had thought of the job for months. He was about ready to pull it off. He leaned forward, peering sarcastically into Peter Robb's face. And wouldn't Mr. Peter Robb like to come along and help? There was always room for one more good man—

Robb smiled peculiarly.

"Why sure," he murmured. "Funny, but I just been thinkin' of that, myself. It was the thing I told you I wanted to talk to you about, Red. Sure, I'll go in—"

Chicago Red sat a minute watching Robb, then, without a word, got up. An expression of satirical amusement twisted his cold features.

At the door he beckoned to a man, who came into the shack. It was Fritz.

"Our distinguished guest, Mr. Robb, is tired, Fritz, and wants to go to bed," announced Red, ironically. "Take him over to the hotel, and see that he has everything he needs."

Fritz nodded and jerked his pistol snout at Robb. Without a word Robb got up and preceded him out of the cabin.

The hotel was, in reality, a jail. Across the windows of a cabin with extra strong walls and door had been fastened bars of oak, two inches thick and two inches apart. There was no chimney and no crevice through which even a cat could squeeze to freedom.

And into this rustic prison, Fritz, without a word, shoved Robb at the point of his pistol.

Robb heard the heavy door scrape shut, the grate of the key in the lock. The footsteps of Fritz faded into silence.

Peter Robb made a swift but thorough scrutiny of the room and then hunted over the walls till he found a tiny chink between two logs through which he could peer.

The view, however, was valueless—only an empty expanse of ground and the corner of a cabin—and after a moment, he went and sat on the corner of the single bunk.

As he sat there, minute after minute, in the thickening dusk, his restless eyes, like a caged animal's, swept and reswept every nook and corner of the room.

And moreover, as he waited, he listened. And of what he was listening for, he had given Chicago Red not the slightest hint.

CHAPTER VI

A TWO-GUN STRANGER

In his first tour of inspection of the jail, Robb had found a nail lying in a crevice between two logs, and put it in his pocket.

In the early dark, as he sat waiting and listening on the bunk-edge, he bent the end of it between two planks.

An hour later, he had gone to work on the lock of the door.

And at two o'clock, two hours before the first streaks of early dawn, after close to six hours of nerve-racking and utterly noiseless dentistry, the ponderous weight swung wide in front of him.

A low moon threw swart shadows of the valley walls across a field of lemon-yellow. Vague blots of jet marked out the cabins. From the rope corral came the stamp of hoofs and a muffled whinney. There was no noise—no sign of human life—

Robb shrank back farther in his shadow. Some prompting of his sixth sense, that mysterious instinct that telegraphs the news of peril as yet unseen and unheard to animals and desert wanderers, had warned him.

A stick cracked. Out of the blot of ink between him and the sound came the sudden tinker of steel on steel. A click—the hammer of an old-fashioned revolver announcing its rise into position.

His escape had been either noted or suspected. They were creeping up on him.

Rigid as stone, breathing in thin wisps inaudible six inches off, Robb slowly raised the club of strayed firewood that he had noticed outside of the jail when he went in and picked up as he came out, and waited.

At his elbow, a shadow darker than the shadows of the trees took form. There was a thud as the club dropped; a softer rustling as the man wilted to the ground.

In five seconds Robb had stooped, slipped off the man's belt and loaded shells and picked up his revolver. He glided ten feet sidewise, tripped on a waist-high boulder, went to his knees and then scrambled behind it.

There had been, altogether, less noise than a man would make scratching a match. But, mysteriously, all at once, the camp was astir.

There was no light, no shouting, no disturbance. Only soft, indefinite rustlings; six-foot shadows flitting back and forth; a muttered curse as the open door of the jail was discovered; the flare of a match, instantly doused, out of a shack.

Against the dim glow of the sky, Robb made out a figure stooped over the man he had knocked out. The quick, supple start with which he straightened and peered about into the dark identified him—Red.

As Robb snapped up his revolver, he faded out of sight.

From back among the shacks, the white glare of an electric torch suddenly bit into the dark. Like an accusing finger, it flitted over the yard, bringing out the trees in naked blackness, throwing inky blots of shade behind every stone and bush.

Back and forth, methodically, it swept. And the course of its wavering journey would bring it, in some few seconds, to shoot square over the top of the rock behind which Robb squatted.

Robb raised his gun again, aimed square into the glare, and fired. There was a crash of glass, a yell of pain from a broken wrist, and darkness.

But the dark was now tumultuous with uproar. From all around the semi-circle of trees and cabins that faced him, came a rain of slugs. Robb felt the wind of them as they whizzed past his head, he heard the dull *spat* as they flattened against the rock.

From twenty feet nearer and on his flank, came a steady thread of flashes, whose bullets first carried away his hat and then spattered the ground so close that the little volcanoes of dust stung his throat and nostrils.

He thought fast. From reasons both of economy and of retaining what little cover he had behind the rock, he had so far, but for the one shot at the man with the flash, held his fire. But he could not do so much longer. The semi-circle of flame in front was gradually drawing closer. Soon there would be a rush. He would get the first one or two, and then the rest would overwhelm him.

To hold off these wolves he must fire back. But the moment he did so, the man on his flank, whom he knew instinctively to be Red, would have his exact location, and then one shot would do the rest.

Robb waited, playing for the break that he knew would come—the break which his faith in his own eventual good luck had enabled him to snatch up times without number, and, making use of it by a flash of genius, turn disaster into victory.

And during the brief seconds while he delayed, the ring of flame in front stole closer. Moreover, its fire slackened. In a moment, they would rush.

But Robb had hardly noticed this. He had been watching the direction of Red's fire—methodically in a circle, up, down, around, the bullets traveled, time after time. Red was broadcasting his shots, under the theory that if he scattered them systematically enough, he would be sure to get Robb in the end.

But any system, once you get to know it, is bound to have its weak spots.

Like a snake, flat on his stomach, Robb suddenly left the shelter of the stone and wriggled straight toward the bottom of the tree behind which Red was hiding. At the moment he had started, the slugs were falling on the other side of the circle, three feet behind him; and by the time he had traveled ten feet toward the tree, he figured he would be so near that, even if they were coming in line with him, they would clear his head.

It was a beautiful piece of strategy—to creep up on Chicago Red right into the fire of his pistol—but *under* it—the last thing in the world that anybody would ever think of. And then, just as he fired, to leap up under his gun, knock it out of his hand and stick the snout of his own gat into his stomach.

A clever bit of strategy, indeed—but, as Peter Robb should have known, there is somewhat more to any piece of work than the planning.

Robb had covered his journey to Red, all but a thin two yards. Flat on the ground in front of him, in the shadow of a foot-high scrub spruce, he could even hear the clicking of the mechanism of his automatic and see his crouched figure blocked out against the stars. He could have shot him through the heart, or brought him down, football wise, in a single leap with a tackle about the knees.

Robb had drawn himself together for the last three feet of crawling before his rush, when a ripping echo like the tearing of a sail on a racing yacht in a gale crashed through the air. There was a yell as one of the men in the circle that was creeping up on Robb threw up his hands and dropped.

Then, suddenly, the firing stopped on both sides. Robb knew that the men of Red's gang were amazedly demanding of themselves how a stranger with a high-powered rifle had managed to get into the valley and where he was firing from. And firing as deadly as the shot that had dropped one gangster with a bullet through the heart.

Robb saw Chicago Red, crouching still lower, steal around to the other side of the tree so that his back was now to the cabins and his own men. The shot had come from somewhere out beyond.

Red had hardly gained the shelter of the trunk when the rifle opened up again, at random. Its position was clear enough now—some hundred feet or so down the valley, where a cluster of boulders as big as houses stood piled in gaunt confusion.

Robb heard Red grit out an oath. Entrenched in these, it would take a pitched battle to drive him out.

Instantly Robb realized what Red's next move would be—to call off his men and wait till daylight before making plans to oust the intruder. But long before that he would be discovered and potted like a partridge.

With Red's attention all centered on the measured, vicious shooting of the stranger, it was easy for Robb to creep the remaining four feet to the tree, to glide around its base, to leap up suddenly as a panther behind Red, to stick the muzzle of his revolver in his short ribs, and, as his hands wavered furiously up, to twitch his pistol from his grip.

Robb pulled the swearing man down on the ground beside him.

"Low bridge—and easy on the psalm tunes, friend Red," he murmured. "Onless ye want to pass westward in a hurry. Our new arrival out yonder seems right handy with his iron—"

In the dark, Robb felt more than saw the glare of rage that Red turned on him.

"Your work, you double-crossing skunk," snarled Red. "You brought him in here, behind you. I'm going to get him, but I'll get you first, you—"

"Easy, easy, Red," soothed Robb. "Don't call no names that you might have to take back—it's liable to be plumb onpleasant.

"As fer my bringin' him in here, whoever he is, who keeps care of your front doorway down yonder—my men or yours? An' whose fault is it if somebody got by?

"Besides an' moreover, don't forget, while you're talkin', that that date we've got, you and me, to shake the stuffin' out of Valley City some day before long hain't been called off none. We'll jest get rid of this here coyote and then talk it all over again pleasant-like—"

He broke off suddenly. As he was speaking, the stranger had stopped firing again. It was still pitch dark, though dawn was near, and in the trees roundabout the morning twitterings of the birds had begun to sound. Otherwise, silence—the tense, expectant silence of men who crouched behind rocks and trees, fingers on triggers, and strained their eyes into the dark—filled the valley.

For close to half an hour, as black darkness yielded to the powdery grey that stole in over the valley rims, nobody moved. There was no sound of voices, except Red's, querulously muttering curses at Peter Robb from time to time, and the monotone of Robb's curt retorts.

Gradually it became possible to make out the shapes of trees, cabins and stones in the strengthening light. On the opposite side of the clearing a man ripped out an oath and sent a bullet zipping toward the cluster of boulders a hundred yards away.

There was no reply.

At his left, another did the same. From all up and down the line, slugs peppered the huge pile of rocks. And to all of this, there was no answering shot, nor sign of life.

From behind a rock, a hat cautiously reconnoitered. Again no sign of interest from the boulder pile.

The man picked the hat off of the stick that had supported it, and with an impatient exclamation, stepped into the open. Another and another followed his example. In a moment, the clearing was dotted with men who peered about perplexedly and demanded of each

other with much profanity where Red was.

Red's grin at Robb was malevolent with triumph.

"They've got him.

"They'll come over here in a minute and find us. If you drill me, they'll do the same for you—"

"And if they don't, you will," answered Robb softly. "I might as well get some fun before I quit—"

"Hands up!"

The voice, hard as steel and with a crack of command like a whip-lash, had come from a thicket of spruce less than ten feet behind Robb and Red. At the same instant there rose up out of it the figure of a tall, slender young man whose clothes were the worse for wear, but whose grey eyes were level as rifle barrels and who held the two revolvers in his hands with an ominous familiarity.

At sight of him, Robb's eyes narrowed and his face contracted sharply, but he said nothing. He was looking at the revolvers, one of which slanted toward him and Red, while the other trained in the general direction of the yardful of men.

"Turn around, *back to*, you men out there," snapped Collins. "Pull out your guns and throw them on the ground. Then put your hands up again. The first one that gets funny—"

The revolver in Collins's left hand coughed hoarsely and one of the men slumped forward gently on his face and lay still. His hand had flickered toward his gun *before* he turned around.

"I can aim and shoot with both hands at once," snarled Collins, "and hit every time. So you skunks will have to think up some other little trick. You, Robb and Chicago Red there, get up and do the same—back to, *then* pull your guns and throw them into the bushes. After that, go out front there with the others—"

Two minutes later, Collins, leaning against a tree, a smile of satirical irony on his frozen features, orated briefly to the ring of furious men who, hands in the air, stood snarling at him like wolves.

"Jake Armstrong, U. S. Secret Service, gentlemen," he introduced himself. "I've been just three years getting in here to Mr. Chicago Red's little city—he's kept himself well hidden. It took a man who knew the way, we figured up in Washington, to bring me in. There was only one we knew of, and he was locked up—Peter Robb. So I had myself locked up, too, right side of him.

"Nobody in the prison, not even Jolliet, knew the truth about me. I came up there with perfectly good papers for ten years for a hold-up—which never had taken place. After Mr. Robb and I had got acquainted we helped each other slide out of stir, and then I managed to induce him to come here instead of where he had intended to go. In a way, it was rather a difficult proposition, you understand, because it wouldn't do us any good to get Red and lose Robb while we were doing it. I had to let Robb have his head and then pinch him again at the close-up, so as to have them both for Jolliet. . . . I believe the Governor told him he was going to have a friend to keep you company before long, didn't he, Robb?"

A twitch of sinister amusement was the only answer on Peter Robb's black face. Chicago Red, livid with rage, spat out an oath.

"I'll get the both of you skunks before you're a day older," he frothed. "You're one against twenty, Armstrong. You can't pull it off—"

"That's what I've been hearing ever since I started out after you, Red," smiled Armstrong icily. "But here I am. If you plan to ditch me, it's your move."

His eyes flickered like flashes of grey fire over the group.

"I'm tired, men, and I'm going to rest," he announced. "After dinner, we start South. Until then, I'm going

to lock you up. The jail's over there—get into it—all but Robb and Red."

When the oaken door had closed on the furious crew, Collins, or Armstrong, demanded from Red the key, and turned it in the lock.

"I give you six hours to break out," he remarked as, after a careful examination of the massively barred windows, he turned away. "And I'll be around again before that."

Robb and Chicago Red he herded in front of him to Red's cabin. Ordering Red to lie face down on the floor and not to wiggle on penalty of a bullet, he hog-shackled and trussed Robb expertly. Then he did likewise for Red.

"By keeping you two in here with me," he smiled dryly as he stood back to inspect his work, "I do two things—I prevent you from using your good brains to tell that bunch out yonder how to get out, and I also keep you from killing each other afterward—I promised the Governor to bring you back with me."

With a sigh of relief, Armstrong turned his back on them and strode to the table. He ate ravenously and then without so much as glancing at his captives threw himself on the bunk. In three minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER VII

THE TABLES TURNED

Having tied his dangerous prisoners hand and foot, Jake Armstrong thought it unnecessary to gag them. He was too tired; besides, he figured that it might be to his advantage to listen in, under pretense of sleeping, if they started to chatter.

Here was where he made his one mistake. He forgot to remember that mouths can be used for other things than talking.

But, first, there was a brief and pointed interchange—in whispers.

"You double-crossing squealer," had snarled Red. "You brought him in here, same as I said. How much did they pay you—a couple of years off?"

"I brought him in, nothing!" snapped Robb. "He got out with me, and he come along with me till we struck the basin down yonder, and yore man sent a slug over our heads. The minnit I put my hands up, he jumped into the scrub and I never saw him again. I figgered he was just plumb scared out of his wits and was aimin' to go back. All the way he was blowin' about what he had pulled. He knew a bunch of the boys, too. I sure figgered he was on the square, Red."

Chicago Red turned a fierce glare of scrutiny from his blue eyes onto Robb's earnest face and grunted.

"Well," he snapped at length, "on the level or not, Pete, this is the hell of a mess. He's sure one cool customer. We gotta work together now, if we never did before. What'll we do?"

Robb thought a moment, then started whispering. And as he whispered, a grin of unholy triumph broadened over Red's white, wolf-like countenance. With a stealthy glance at the detective's motionless form, he started hitching and wriggling his baled-up figure across the floor toward Robb.

"I got first-rate teeth," had whispered Robb. "So've you, Red. Let's play rat for a spell—"

It took close to an hour of desperate, soundless work for the two bandits, taking turns, to gnaw, chew and tug loose with their teeth the knots in the cords that bound each other's hands as they lay on the floor not three yards distant from the bed where the Secret Service man lay plunged in the slumber of utter weariness.

Eventually, however, the ropes fell off, and they sat up. With swift, expert strokes they undid the fastenings about their feet.

Silently as great cats they rose to their feet. Armstrong stirred, stretched, opened his eyes. In the instant that Robb and Red plunged at him, he leaped off of the bunk, with the same motion sweeping up one of the guns that lay at his side.

The first shot went between the rushing men. Before Armstrong could pull the trigger again, Robb, who had caught up the second of his guns as he went past the bunk, fired from five-foot distance.

A red smudge widening slowly downward from his temple, Armstrong dropped limply in the corner.

Running up, Robb pushed aside Chicago Red's hob-nailed boots, poised in vicious blood-lust above the crumpled figure.

"Let him be," ordered Robb. "He's out of the way now—and, tec or not, he sure had nerve. Don't put the boots to him."

Out in the clearing, five minutes later, Chicago Red, linking arms with Robb, led him up to a knot of excited men.

"Here's our new pardner, boys," he announced. "He pulled us all out of the hole, here just now, and from now on he's with us. Go get your breakfasts—in an hour we pull out—for Valley City."

A chorus of shouts and cheers rang out as the men scattered to their cabins.

An hour and a half later, just as the big group of mounted men pulled out of the clearing, headed south, Peter Robb ran back again into the cabin, where the body of the detective, forgotten in the excitement, still lay in the corner.

Bending over it, he examined it minutely. Then, nodding in satisfaction, he left the shack.

CHAPTER VIII

HOME FIRES

It was somewhat comforting to those troubled citizens of Valley City who had been pondering over the simultaneous approach of Robb and Chicago Red to observe the six or seven strangers who dropped off the noon train, and the dozen or so more who came in on the three-ten.

They were alert, keen-looking chaps, bronzed with outdoors, hard of eye and mouth and saving of speech. Attempts to open acquaintance with them on the part of some of the city's residents with the suggestion, "Be you a detective, pardner?" or, "Where do they reckon Peter Robb has got to now?" were curtly rebuffed. The new arrivals had nothing to say to anybody. They merely drifted into the town and settled in obviously assigned positions.

If any one man more than another seemed to be in their confidence, it was the stoop-shouldered, mild-faced little individual with inquiring eyes and greying hair who had been seen in conversation with one and another of them from time to time.

He looked more like a tired-out old clerk out of a store than a detective, yet Valley City citizens, observing him talking to the youthful strangers, would wink and nod to one another.

Pinkertons—and the queer old party was the boss. Looked clever, even if he was a moss-back. Wait till Peter Robb came!

Sheriffs Kroll of Prison County and Holmes of Canyon County, where Valley City was, along with Jolliet, also came in on the three-ten.

Amid some faint cheers and quite a few cat-calls, Jolliet was driven to the hotel, while the sheriffs walked. A sizable crowd followed him and hung around on the piazza and the steps after he had gone in. The remarks were not complimentary; the crowd did not like Jolliet.

"Dum ornery cuss, ef ye ask me," spat a lean cowboy in a flannel shirt and gun-belt. "Don't blame this here Peter Robb none fer diggin' out. Hope he gets clean off. Bet he does, too—what say, pardner?"

The last words were addressed to the mild-looking little man with grey hair, who had left his chair at the corner of the piazza and sidled up toward the conversation. There was a sudden quiet as everybody edged forward to hear what he was going to say.

"Peter Robb's home town?" the cowboy was repeating. "Sure, stranger—

I thought everybody knew that. He's expected to drop in most any time, tonight. These ones you see around the streets are the reception committee, sort of—all loaded up to give him a snappy welcome."

The cowboy's voice sounded puzzled. "But I thought that you—"

The thin, mild, little man smiled as if the idea amused him.

"Seems kind of queer they should think he would come right here where they're all waiting for him," he interrupted.

The cowboy nodded and spat cordially.

"My idea, stranger. It'd be a dum fool play—and whatever else he is, Pete Robb ain't no fool. I don't reckon he'll land in here at all."

The little man got out a clay pipe, filled and lighted it thoughtfully.

"I wonder if you would do me a favor, young man?" he ventured after a moment. "If you've got half an hour to spare, that is. Show me around the town—I'd kind of like to know where the sights are—"

"Why, sure!" exclaimed the cowboy, his expression growing still more bewildered. "Come right along, mister. We'll start down to the deepo and do it proper."

Side by side, the tall cowboy and the insignificant-looking little man descended the steps and threaded their way through the crowds on the sidewalk. With a flow of oratory that would have done credit to a motor-bus barker, the cowpuncher, who had given his name as Stebbins, expatiated on the new railroad station, the public library, the Post Office, the watering trough, the City Hall.

Passing through the square, he turned a few steps down a side street, around a corner from a new brick building, and stopped in front of what looked like half of a tumble-down, decaying house, plastered against the side of the brick building like a swallow's nest on a barn.

"Seein' as we was talkin' about Pete Robb, I thought I might as well show you his house—what there is left of it. Ain't been nobody in it sence old lady Robb kicked off, ten years back, an' they took a slice off'n the roof when they built the new bank there."

He waved his hand at the brick edifice and laughed.

"That's the bank, right next to Robb's house. Funny, ain't it? Gosh, if Robb was here, he'd *rob* it, inside out, in a minnit."

Stebbins pointed across a vacant lot in the rear of the bank.

"Another funny thing—Chicago Red, that you maybe have heard of—another bad man with a gun—belongs in this place, too. He had the house right back of Robb's. And over yonder is the house where their girl used to live—they were sweet on the same skirt, too. That was what busted 'em up, I guess—they were great pals for a while."

"Most likely," grunted the little man. "What became of the girl?"

"I dunno—she went off with one of 'em, I guess. Never did know which. She never came back here, anyhow. . . . Well, I guess that's about all of the town, stranger, and there's a feller up ahead I want to see, so—"

"Oh, certainly," said the little man, looking up suddenly out of his bright, black eyes. "Don't let me keep you—and thanks, very much. I'm just going to walk around a little longer before I go back to the hotel—"

Looking back through the tornado of excitement that numbed the recollections of Valley Citiers that night, no one's memory was very confident of where or when the little man was seen again.

Mrs. Sherman, whose house stood by the abandoned quarry a hundred yards from the bank, thought she remembered noticing him poking about the pit edge and later sitting with his back against a stone, petting a stray cur dog that had run up to him.

Later, he was uptown again, talking

with the Pinkertons on the corners, it was said.

And just before dusk, Mrs. Sherman's boy, coming back from an errand, whispered to her through chattering teeth, that, with the cur dog at his heels, the old man was nosing around the Robb house and trying to get in.

Mrs. Sherman laughed at him; but after supper he dodged out of the house and stole the short distance back to the Robb ruin.

Creeping through a yard tangled with matted shrubbery, he came to a window and peeked in.

The little old man had gone inside the old, wrecked house. He was in the kitchen. By the dim light of a wood fire that he had kindled in the old stove, he was eating his supper of fried eggs and bacon, off of the rough, wabbly table. The yellow cur sat at his side, catching cleverly the scraps that the man tossed him.

After he had finished eating, the little man sat back, looking around the room, at the dusty chairs and tables, the faded letters and newspapers all lying crumpled and abandoned, just as they had the ten years since old woman Robb had died.

Presently the man got up and opened the door leading out of the kitchen into the front room. The yellow dog trailed at his heels.

The little old man stood for a minute in the middle of the room, looking about, then crossed to the other side and knocked with his knuckles on the wall. On the other side of the flimsy lath and plaster partition of the house was the back wall of the bank—merely two courses of brick laid in worthless mortar.

Everyone had remarked, during the building of the bank, that it was funny that it should have been put right against the old Robb house.

An expression of contempt crossed the features of the little man. He turned back again and sat down in a chair in the middle of the room. The yellow dog lay down at his feet and looked up steadily into his face.

In the gathering dusk it looked to the Sherman boy as if the old man was crazy—as if a smile of reminiscent happiness stole over his face as he sat leaning back in the ramshackle old rocking-chair, gazing at the decrepit figure of the old square piano in the corner, the dim chromos in frames of tarnished gilt, the motto over the stove, the whitened tracks worn from door to door through the dingy yellow paint on the floor.

The old man sighed and closed his eyes, his fingers rubbing absently behind the ears of the yellow cur, which had roused up and laid his head across the man's thin knee.

From up street, toward the square, came a gust of yells and shouts. With a shiver of terrified excitement, the boy darted back from the peephole in the broken pane and dashed out of the yard.

CHAPTER IX

PETER ROBB GOES HOME

AROUND midnight, men in the rear of the crowd gathered around the hotel bar—where, in mournful memory of happier days, the white-coated boy dished out unsatisfying sarsaparillas and nut-sundaes — glanced around, startled, at the entrance of a newcomer. For an instant the clatter of conversation lagged. It was just the time when it was easy to picture Peter Robb swooping in on a roomful of men, lining them against the wall, running with lightning speed through their pockets and then vanishing.

But it was only the under-sized, mild-looking stranger who had been wandering aimlessly about town all the afternoon. His felt hat was pulled over his eyes, his hands were in his pockets. At his side trailed a cur dog with thistles in his hair.

The little man sidled up to the bar. "Nice evenin', gents," he murmured

affably. "I see you're still lookin' fer excitement. I was down to the bank there this afternoon. Right smart lookin', I call it—credit to the town. Ain't no man would find it easy t' crack into, would they?"

"Peter Robb would—soup an' fuse—half an' hour an' skip out," snapped the iron-jawed man at his elbow. "Wish't he'd come an' git done with it. I'm tired waitin'. What might be *your* name an' station, stranger? New to this town, ain't ye?"

The little man looked thoughtful. "I was here once—some years ago, mister. Wish't I'd stayed. Aim to come back, mebbe—settle down. I—" As if with a sudden idea, he raised his voice, addressing everybody in the room. "Name your poison, gents—th' drinks are on me. I'm a-goin' to settle down here in Valley City, so—"

With amused, curious laughs and chatter the thirty or forty men shuffled up to the rail. A bunch of cowboys, led by Jed Stebbins, clinked glasses of chocolate-split facetiously on high.

"Three cheers for our new citizen, mister—"

The door in the rear opened. Holding their drinks suspended, the crowd parted curiously to make way for the two men—Warden Jolliet and Sheriff Monroe—who made their way forward. The two officials went up and ordered drinks. It was the best part of a minute before anyone noticed that the queer little man with the dog had disappeared.

He had only slipped out of the hotel to stand on the sidewalk in the shadow of a lamp post. No one noticed him. He had not moved when, some five or ten minutes later, a group of the young, efficient-looking men whose presence had so reassured timid townsmen that afternoon strolled past him into the hotel. Two of them were snapping shut their watches. One muttered something that sounded like, "Zero—let's go."

A little way off, across the square, six or seven more of them stood, sharply attentive. Someone blew a single shrill scream on a policeman's whistle. At the sound, another compact group of men turned down the side street leading to the police station. There were eight men on the Valley City force, four on and four off duty at the time.

The little man turned and followed the five strangers into the hotel. From the hall he watched them swiftly produce pistols and snap curt orders to the group at the bar.

Most of the hands went up instantly. Those of Warden Jolliet were the promptest of any to obey. Two or three men gasped, "Robb, by God!"

Sheriff Monroe, barking an oath, grabbed at his gun. A pencil of flame drilled the dusk and Monroe, wilting at the knees, tumbled to the floor and lay still. On the other end of the line two more men were shot.

"Turn around an' face th' wall," snapped the leader. "Stan' still an' they won't nawthin' hurt ye. Sid's goin' around to collect in yore guns."

The little man turned away, tiptoed across the hall and out the door. He descended the steps and started walking leisurely down the sidewalk. His hands hung at his side, the yellow cur trotted at his heels.

Out in the square not a soul was in sight except five or six of the keen-looking guards who strolled up and down, a gun in each hand. One of them saw the little man and yelled:

"Hey, you! Come here. Stick 'em up!"

The little man paused and looked around inquiringly. "What say?" he called, raising his hand to his ear.

"Never mind him, Joe," laughed the guard across the street. "Let him go—the old fool's loco as a coyote. Been hangin' around all day—says he's goin' to buy here an' settle down."

The little man went on down the square. It was strangely lonesome and quiet. The yellow glow of the arc lights threw grotesque black shadows of his short legs and the trotting dog on the

white, bare pavements. The only sound that broke the stillness was from ahead, were the windows of the bank building blazed with light and from which came the metallic clank and whine of breaking steel.

The little man crossed the square to the door of the bank and looked in. The guard at the threshold shoved a gun-snout in his face.

"Hey, what the hell! Stick 'em up, you!"

The little man ignored the order. He stood looking past the guard to where the group of five or six busy figures had cut through the outer grille of inch bars and were adjusting an electric drill before the vault door. The yellow dog ran past him, on inside, sniffing, his toenails scratching loudly on the tiled floor.

At the sudden interruption the men whirled. The tall one in the rear, with the red hair and the scar across his forehead barked out a nervous oath. "Damn that dog! Hey, you, Sims—"

The guard slanted his gun away from the little man. A flash of light spurted and the cur rolled over and over on the floor, yelping, a streak of red from his neck daubing the white tiles. Somebody laughed loudly.

The little man stepped back a pace. In the hand which had hung empty a blue six-shooter oozed a wisp of smoke. The guard's pistol clattered on the floor as he slumped in a heap against the iron gate.

"I sure set a pile o' store by that pup," the little man's mildly complaining voice carried clearly through the bank. "Jest like one I had when I was a boy—"

The red-haired man by the safe took a step forward, his fingers fluttering about the butt of his gun.

"You!" he snarled.

Chicago Red's hand closed about his pistol at the same instant that the pistol sprang into the little man's other hand. The seven men started firing at once. The room was full of shattering echoes, flashes of orange light and acrid smoke.

Two of Chicago Red's yeggs, the same that the Valley City folk had taken for Pinkertons, coughed and slumped to the floor, hands gripping their stomachs. Red's hat was gone, a thread of crimson trickled down his cheek. Stumbling back, he crouched behind a big leather chair pulled from the treasurers' office into the middle of the room.

In the shadows of the doorway, the little man, his hat drawn over his eyes, stood with a coughing pistol in each hand. His second shot had snuffed out the cluster of electric light bulbs in the ceiling, and nothing but long shafts of light from the arc lamp in the street shone through the smoke and shadows that filled the bank.

It became quiet. The little man had stopped firing. Crouched behind the chair, Chicago Red could not make out whether his last shot had winged him.

Red waited a minute longer, then half rose from his shelter and peered around. In the doorway the figure of two of his outside men, rifles lowered, appeared.

"Say, Red—" one of them called cautiously.

"Get a light, Joe," ordered Chicago Red. "I got him—he's over there by the door—"

A triplet of shots, blending like one, rippled from behind Red. The little man had stolen in, skirted the walls in the dark, gotten behind him, and was firing from the shelter of the teller's desk. The first two shots had dropped the guards, the third stirred the air over Red's head.

"Outside, Red, outside," purred the voice of the little man. "Outside, you skunk, and finish it in the open—"

The street was empty—empty but for the knots that jammed the doorways up and down, and the two men who stood facing each other at a hundred-foot distance.

It was rather dark. One arc light was broken, the other, swinging in the wind, swept deceptive shadows over

the pavement. The men were firing steadily.

One of them, as many in the crowds guessed, was Chicago Red. The other was the queer, little, inoffensive-looking chap who had treated the bunch in the bar after hanging around town all afternoon—and now out here alone, swapping shots with Chicago Red!

Murmurs of amazement ran down the doorways. "Who is he—a Pinkerton? . . . God, what shootin'!"

A bullet from the little man's gun had struck Red's hand and sent his gun flying to the street. Red swore, the crowd jeered.

"Red's got his other gun out—he's shootin'," exclaimed the man next to Jolliet, hugging the shelter of the Post Office doorway. "He's a-goin' to get him, yet. Who is that little feller, anyway?"

Without answering, Jolliet leaned farther out. He raised a rifle, took careful aim.

The rifle cracked, and the little man seemed to start forward. He hung for a moment poised as if in the air, then, whirling slowly, sank to the ground. At the last second, before his legs gave way, he fired both guns at Chicago Red.

Up in the hotel, and elsewhere, the news of Red's death spread like fire. All over town, in sharp, bloody battles, angry citizens, getting back their nerve, routed knots of cornered yeggs. In ten minutes the raid was over; all of Red's men who had not escaped had been killed.

Down in the square, a crowd jostled around the figure of a slight, old-looking man with black eyes and greyish hair who lay motionless on the pavement.

Jolliet had come, importantly pushing through the crowd.

"Let me get in there, men—"

Voices murmured, angry and hoarse.

"Shot in the back, jest as he dropped Red—he shore saved the town—got Chicago Red, fair an' square, in th' open, an' saved th' bank—who in hell is he?—where's the damn skunk that shot him?—get a rope—"

Jolliet elbowed his way inside the ring and bent over the man. He stood up, dusting his hands.

"Jest as I thought," he announced. "It's him—Robb. Reccernized him when he got to shootin'—"

He waited a moment, glancing around in triumph, while the stunned silence grew into a buzzing of amazed ejaculations, and then laughed gloatingly.

"Well, there he is. I got him, anyhow. Said I would, dead or alive—"

"Yes, you got him, you pore, worm-eaten imitation of a skunk," snarled Jed Stebbins, pushing his purple face into Jolliet's. "You got him in the back while he was defendin' this here city, when all the police an' Pinkertons, includin' you, was hidin' behind lamp-poles. Yore the meanest, yellowest coyote that ever wasted fresh air. Yore so dum jealous that you had to go an' shoot a brave man in th' back because you was a pizen coward. Go get a rope, somebody. We'll stretch the wrinkles outen this here buzzard's neck—"

"Hold on there a minnit, boys. Don't go an' do anything to be sorry fer," came the plaintive voice of Peter Robb up from the ground. "I ain't quite checked out yit, and before I go, there's one or two things I want to say.

"It was yore fault, Jolliet, in the first place, that I got out of stir. Lookin' through that winder at the mountings, I got to thinkin'. Queer how a man will think when he hain't got nothing else to do. I felt jest like a wolf er a painter shet up in a cage when I looked at them—I jest had to get out.

"An' then Valley City here—I always set store by this here town. I never come back here to pull no jobs, you know, boys—when I could of, easy as dirt. In stir, I kep' thinkin'—I wanted to come back here fer a little visit—see th' old house, an' sech, an' how the place had growed. I always been plumb

proud o' the town, boys, even if I hain't seen it in thirty years.

"So that was the main idea when I got out—to come back here. But there was Collins come along with me, an' he raised my suspicions, first crack. Then I found a note that dropped out of his pocket—from the Governor himself, givin' him some orders what to do when he got out.

"An' then, the next day, I asked him some questions about crooks he claimed to know. Half of the answers was right and half was wrong.

"So then I knew he was a detective. Of course I could have killed him easy enough, but I hain't never yet shot a man asleep, ner in the back, ner with his hands up, and I didn't want to start.

"Besides, he had guts, Collins did, and I admire a man with guts. He was takin' one hell of a resk an' not askin' no favors. It ain't my game to kill a man like that, if I can help it.

"His game was easy to see through. It had been framed up fer him to escape with me and then get me to take him in to Chicago Red. They'd been after Red fer ten years without findin' him, an' that was their last shot. Then Collins, or Armstrong, was goin' to pinch us both, an' the hull outfit, and take us out—alone.

"He kep' talkin' about me an' Red bein' pals, Armstrong did, but he must of knowed that Red stole my girl away from me and then killed her with his devilment, an' that it was Red that tipped off the sheriff where to look fer me, five years ago, when I was took. An' so consequently, we was about as lovin' as a pair of rattlesnakes.

"So I thought it over, an' it looked like a good joke on the both of them to take Armstrong in to Red's place, let him nab Red an' his outfit if he could, an' then kind o' slide out o' the way myself. So then Armstrong would have something to take back an' show fer his trouble, anyhow.

"But he outguessed me. Jest before we got into Red's, he ducked out of sight. I went on in—there was some talk of his comin' down to stick up this place, an' I sort o' figgered to find out if that was so, because after I'd kep' my hand off o' here fer thirty years I didn't reckon to have that God-forsaken coyote takin' any liberties, a-tall.

"Red an' I was havin' about the kind of a quiet little gun party that I had expected, when in jumps Armstrong and sticks up the both of us. He had hopped Red's guards down to the valley entrance in th' dark, tied 'em up, and took their guns away. Talk about cold nerve—

"Well, Armstrong was all in. He put the bunch into Red's jail, tied up Red and me and went to sleep right in the same room.

"It didn't take me long to reckon out what was due to happen. No living man could do what Armstrong was figgerin' on—takin' twenty-two men three days out through the hills. Something was bound to slip, and the minute Red's bunch got the drop again they would jest naturally massacree, not only Armstrong, but me, too. . . . And, then if Armstrong *did* happen to pull it off, it was back to stir for me—

"So I showed Red how we could use our teeth to untie each other's knots, and then, when we was loose, I shot Armstrong myself.

"Them two things did jest what I figgered—they gave me about a day more before Red got sore enough to try to finish me again. He thought fer a minnit that I was reely with him—the fool!

"An' in that day, I give Red the slip. I hurried along an' got in here ahead of him. I had time enough to look the town over an' visit back at the old house and set a spell in the front room, rememberin' how my mother used to sing psalm tunes at the pianny Sunday nights, before him an' his bunch got set to go.

"You boys all know what happened after that. I stopped Red from stickin' up the place, an' I evened scores with

him, once fer all, fair an' open—"

A subdued murmur, rising to a growl of anger, rolled around the circle as eyes turned toward Jolliet.

"Jest one thing more," began the voice of Robb again. "About Armstrong. I said I shot him. I had to, to keep others from doin' worse. It was a hard shot, because Red was just jumpin' in ahead of me, but it went right. I creased him, jest over the temple. Bled bad, but nawthin' to hurt —all on the outside. He was beginnin' to come-to jest as we pulled out. An' I sent a letter—"

A tall, distinguished-looking man, who had been listening quietly as Robb talked, interrupted here.

"I got your letter, Robb," he said, "and I sent a posse right in after him, following your directions. They probably found him this afternoon—"

A grateful smile stirred Peter Robb's lips.

"Thanks, Governor," he murmured. "That was plumb white of you. Armstrong might have been a tec, but he was game. An' I sure love a game chicken—"

Amid the murmurs that had started running through the crowd as the presence of Governor Spaulding became known, a professional-looking man who had accompanied him stooped and began a hasty examination of Robb.

"What's the verdict, Dr. Smith?" asked the Governor, as he rose. "How long will he live?"

"About forty years, I should say," smiled the doctor. "He isn't badly hurt. One shot broke his leg, the other smashed his shoulder. He won't be able to use but one gun, hereafter, and he'll walk with a cane and a limp, but—"

Amid the cheers that suddenly roared up from the crowd, Governor Spaulding stooped and gripped Robb's hand.

"A pardon, Robb," the Governor was saying. "As quickly as I can get to my office again, full and on one condition only—that you stay here in Valley City the rest of your life."

"I shore will—I'll have to, I reckon," grinned Robb. "I'll have th' old house made over, next to th' bank, and then, if any more pizen gun-fighters ever drops in, I'll be right handy on th' job—"

The storm of cheers drowned out the rest. As men surged forward to shake Robb's hand, the chubby figure of Jolliet, stooped and huddled, wormed out from the crowd and half ran, half stumbled down the street. A group of gamins on a corner yowled cat-calls as he passed.

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HERE he comes, Miss," said the razor-back, as he lounged under the Big Tent, near the lion cage—"here he comes, that ends his turn."

Miriam Reedy, reporter for the *Daily Star,* turned and peered out eagerly into the great arena. In the ring nearest her a tall blonde Swede, dressed in the traditional circus tights, was driving his four bears into the rear end of the wagon that waited for them, end on. Their act was over: but two of the bears didn't seem to think so. They continued to teeter solemnly and proudly on the two ends of their see-saw, rolling their shaggy white sides and looking around them in a gentle, amiable manner. One was a huge old polar—large and bony: the other also a polar bear but much smaller and in better health.

Twice the Swede snapped his whip at them. The two cinnamon brown bears were already in the cage—the men waited on each side to slide the door across.

"Come on—you," shouted the Swede, snapping his whip furiously at the two bears—then, with a vicious jab he sent the end of his spike into the furry rump of the largest. It cringed, and shambled down, making a big circle around him, and the smaller bear hit the ground with a thump and prepared to follow.

"Come on now," said the Swede between his teeth, and as she passed him, he hit her across the nose. The bear roared with pain and plunged into the cage.

"See here," said Miriam Reedy indignantly, when the tall fellow was brought up to her to be "interviewed"—"you know really, you can't do that sort of thing. Those bears weren't doing anything—not a THING—by rights I ought to report you to the S. P. C. A.—"

The Swede, after staring at her for a moment, sat down on the hind wheel of the bear cage, and taking out an old corncob pipe, lit it and smoked in her face. He was a taciturn man, with sulky blue eyes and rolling muscles across his shoulders, and after her first flush of indignation had passed, Miriam Reedy's newspaper instinct warned her here, possibly, was good copy, if she didn't spoil it by lecturing the man. She adopted a more reasonable tone.

"The snake charmer over here has just been telling me," she ventured, "that she controls her snakes entirely by kindness—and Miss Dinsmore, the lion tamer, says the same thing. Don't you find that as a rule, kindness pays?"

"No, I don't," said the Swede, eyeing her steadily. He was evidently going to be difficult. The reporter waited, with pencil poised.

"You don't think," she insisted, "that

if you trusted your bears—made them feel you're really their friend—that they would behave better?"

The Swede looked at her steadily—smiled in a peculiar manner, and turning his head, spat into the bear cage.

"Friends?" he said gruffly—"with THEM?—nix."

"But they're so gentle—they look so kind," she expostulated, a glow of indignation rising in her again—"and you struck them—when they weren't doing a THING."

No answer.

"Very well," said Miss Reedy with sudden dignity, "I really haven't any time to waste," and turning from the man she made up her mind indignantly to expose his cruelty in her article on the Circus, and to get even with him if possible for his surly and uncalled for manners.

Chris Hanssen, left sitting alone on the wheel of his bear cage, stared dumbly into space. He was seeing into his past life—seeing a "story," which, could the reporter have got to it, would for drama and pathos have beat anything in the way of "copy" which she got that day. But it was an incident that no one in the world knew, or ever would know, except Chris himself and the two bears behind him.

CHAPTER II

"WAVERING ARMS STRETCHED DOWN ACROSS THE SEA"

It was the spring of 1892, and Chris, last of a long line of sea-faring Hanssens, had shipped first mate on the Flying Lena, a whaler bound for Kane basin—a stormy voyage that was to be her last.

How it came about that they got caught, Chris never could explain.

When they pressed him for the ghastly details, he used to shake his head and say.

"Assk the ice—she iss the one who knows"—the treacherous, gleaming, silent ice floe, with its feet on the pole, and its wavering arms stretched down across the sea—long arms of northern lights, of crumbling glacier edge, of tricky, breaking floe, that floats hidden under its veil of storms.

It was one of these storms that descended suddenly upon the Flying Lena, somewhere off lat. 55°, long, 73°, 10′. The wind, blowing 60 miles an hour, drove her straight up out of the whaling belt—north—north—north, into the unknown ice of Kane's basin. She was heavily laden with whalebone and oil, and her nose was already turned for the sunlit shores of Sweden, when this gale had come upon them—and now, darkness and fury and the intolerable arctic night. The midnight sun no longer showed on the horizon—there WAS no horizon—only a blinding sheet of sleet against one's face, and a wind that cut through the clothes like a knife.

The look-out reported open sea ahead. The crew grumbled. A week lost: possibly more. If only the ice would close in—but the cards were shuffled and the game started below decks, and a merry night was had by all, for, after all, what was an arctic storm to this seasoned crew—and the Flying Lena was pronounced by one and all to be as tight a little craft as you could wish to see.

On the second night of the gale there came an ominous cry from the look-out—"Ice ahead"—at any rate the Captain thought it ominous. He had been an explorer in his day—along the foot of Humboldt Glacier, and he had seen the demon Ice in her own kingdom. But the crew shouted with joy, for it meant that the Flying Lena would be stopped in her mad race north. And so she was. An hour later, bent before the gale, she was jammed fast in an ice pack that seemed to stretch a hundred miles in every direction. The crew got out the Haig and Haig: there was jubilation, and they sang Norwegian drinking songs, while the ice outside, like a sinister bass viol, played an accompaniment—groaning and crunching and booming beneath the storm.

Peering out, before they turned in for

" . . . Its huge, swaying head stilled, ominously, for a second"

the night, a weird sight met their eyes. Ice ridges, pushing themselves up with reports like cannon, rose like gleaming spectres within twenty yards of the ship: her stern was vigorously lifted by their pressure. Wedged in between two solid blocks of ice, she rocked with them as though in a cradle, in time to the vast heaving of all the floe around. Her sides, caught as in a vise, nevertheless slipped up, and out, when the pressure became too great—for she was built for ice, was the Flying Lena—a bottle-nose whaler of 92 tons register—two pole masts and a funnel, 110 feet over all, and her sides all sheathed with green heart and oak two feet thick and belts of iron around her cutwater, to help her ram the ice. But tonight, the ice rammed her.

"This iss bad," said Chris Hanssen.

"She's weathered worse than this," said the Captain. "All hands below"—and they crawled down out of the blinding, raging sleet. The wind was blowing 60 miles an hour. The time was 5 A. M. and black as pitch. The thermometer was 43 below zero.

"I've seen it colder'n this," said the Captain.

"I have not," said Chris Hanssen.

His watch ended, he turned in to his bunk: put his pocket knife, his revolver, and a used plug of tobacco under his pillow and went to sleep, with the wind and ice tearing at him through two feet of oak, with iron bands across.

Twenty minutes later the ship was suddenly crushed like an egg shell —one deafening crash, and it was all over.

How Chris got on deck he does not remember. The hoarse screams of his companions, crushed in their bunks, reached him faintly through the roaring of the wind—he heard water rushing at his heels—he felt the ship rise suddenly —shoot twenty feet upward as the ice caught her and met inside her ribs—a moment later the whole ridge broke, separated, and rolled over—Chris, staggering along the deck, felt it go out from under his feet—he jumped—with all his strength—out into the darkness —a gulf opened beneath him—then a terrible impact upon something wet and hard—then silence.

When he became conscious again he felt underneath his head for his plug.

It was not there. Then he sat up. God, how cold it was. He fumbled for his watch. 10 A. M. The storm had passed and the stars were shining. What was he doing out on deck?—had he slept out his watch?—he stumbled to his feet. Around him water; icebergs and floating floe: broken ice hummocks, torn by the storm into fantastic shapes, and on the horizon, the midnight sun, swimming in a bloody mist. Beneath his feet—not the familiar greasy deck, but ice—curious, green-blue ice with all the snow worn off of it—what the Hell!—? ——*** He turned abruptly. Above him, a jagged mound, like a pile of ice cream, with a gleaming peak and a broad melting base. And around that base, the Polar Sea, a rushing tumult of ice-grey water, flowing steadily south.

Memory dawned upon him slowly. He was afloat on an iceberg traveling north. And the Flying Lena?—not a trace—not a spar to tell where she had sunk. The ice hummocks stretched in gleaming panorama as far as eye could see, storm-swept—silent—solitary.

Chris Hanssen sat down upon the edge of the berg and weighed the comparative advantages of starvation and drowning. He decided to drown, and being simple by nature, and a man of action, he set out at once along the edge of the berg, to search for a spot where the drop would be sheer and abrupt, with no chance of catching hold, out of the icy water. The grim solitude hung over him like a pall. His one instinct was to end it at once. He wished dully, as he trudged along, that he had died with his companions.

A more romantic man might have sensed the thrill of commanding the whole polar sea from an iceberg, like a king upon a floating throne: a less experienced one might even have dallied with the idea of getting off the berg on to the ice foot—of finding a seal-hole and catching a seal—and living upon its blubber until help came.

But Chris Hanssen was not romantic and he *was* experienced. He was moreover one of those men who pin all their faith on hard facts: when facts fail them, they prefer death to sentimentality. Chris knew perfectly well that North of lat. 55° long. 73°-10′, where the ship had been seized by the storm, there was no land for 300 miles. He knew that the first Esquimo village north of that point was Uppernavik—another 200 miles. Which meant that even though the ship had been driven in the gale at the rate of forty miles an hour for five hours, he must still be 300 miles from Uppernavik. If the berg had been floating due north, he might make it before starvation set in—given an open lead all the way. But the berg was floating northwest, at a direct tangent to the land and the chances of an open sea for 250 miles in Kane basin, were, to a man of Chris's experience, nil.

Moreover Chris knew that even if he did find a seal hole on the floe he could not catch any fish through it. He had watched skilled esquimos lie at breathing-holes and catch small fish with their bare hands, plunging their arms down the hole—and for all their inherited skill, missing the catch three times out of every five.

No, Chris was not romantic. So, having quietly faced the facts as he saw them, he trudged along the ice foot and watched for a place to drop off.

But the Divinity that shapes our ends seems to take a whimsical delight in occasionally fooling the Men of Facts. He lets the fairies loose on them, and they go insane—or he shows them that facts lied and they die of melancholia, or he just plays some little fantastic trick on them, and leaves them unharmed but a little confused, all the rest of their lives. This last is what happened to Chris Hanssen.

For at the precise moment when he struggled to his feet and began to move to the left along the floe, something else rose to its feet on the opposite of the berg, and began to move to the right. The berg being in a general way round,

it was inevitable that sooner or later these two moving bodies should meet.

And so they did, quite suddenly, around a corner of jutting snow and ice, and stopping in astonishment and unbelief they stared at each other, and what Chris saw was a small, yellowish and very fat polar-bear cub,—and what the cub thought it saw, who shall say?—

Chris had a sudden vision of bear meat—brown, fragrant, smoking. But it was only a flash, followed instantly by three ugly but trustworthy facts—first, no matches: second no weapon, and third the knowledge that even floe-bred bear-cubs have mothers somewhere behind. Chris thought fiercely of his pocket knife, lying under his pillow, somewhere at the bottom of the Polar Sea.

Hope died in his heart. He turned from the bear with a grunt and continued his examination of the glacier edge.

The bear-cub also seemed to be slightly bored. Taking its small beady eyes off the man, it turned around in one spot twice, then trotting to the water's edge as though with a sudden idea, it lay flat down on its paunch and hung its round furry head over the edge with its snout near the water. Was it, too, contemplating suicide?—Chris paused to watch it. There was something at once tragic and comic in its fat, helpless, puppy-like movements, and its bland indifference to the immensities around it.

Suddenly it gathered its round little rump together, gripped the ice with its haunches and with a sudden swift lunge of its forearm down into the water brought up in its claws a fish which flapped across the ice, this way and that.

Hoped leaped in the heart of Chris Hanssen. So that was it! Those helpless bear-cub movements were not so aimless after all. They spelt food. Like a flash he was on the fish—a big three pounder, which a second later would have been hooked alive into the bear-cub's mouth. That valiant hunter, deprived of his meal, seemed hurt rather than angry. She looked at her paw; she looked at the water: she gave it up. Chris killed the fish, but hungry as he was—hungry enough to eat it raw, esquimo fashion—he hesitated. That fish meant twenty-four hours more of life—he would save it. Hope surged into his heart—a fierce hope that the bear-cub, was, like himself, cut adrift—alone on the berg. He would make friends with it. After all—if IT could live, why not he too? Taking a sharp piece of ice, he hacked the still limp fish into hunks, and stuffed them into the pockets of his bearskin coat. His heart beat in a sort of dull excitement.

He felt a sudden affection for the bear-cub. Although it was already as large as he, it looked like a huge puppy, tumbling about on the ice. He crawled up to it on all fours and patted it. Then his eyes became suddenly fixed: they started with horror and his jaw dropped slightly. Standing not ten yards from them was a greenish yellow object which rocked slowly from side to side rubbing one of its vast flanks against the white ice wall—it was a bear: the largest polar bear that Chris had ever seen. His brain stopped functioning entirely. He crouched there on all fours beside the cub and waited. The bear advanced a little, rolling from side to side and emitting the peculiar hissing sound which means attack. Between them the bear-cub lay on its back and thoughtfully sucked one fat, white paw.

Now, of course, in accordance with logic, Chris should have taken a flying leap into the Arctic Ocean and met a comparatively peaceful death, for the facts of this situation were not in his favor. But a cog slipped in Chris's brain. Rather than die, he stooped to sentimentality—he took a chance on the Improbable.

Throwing one arm around the bear-cub in a frenzy of [illegible] it—to

dearing names as though it were a dog, and at the same time to draw out of his pocket one of the pieces of raw fish, which he dangled above the bear-cub's nose.

It sat up promptly on its hind legs, and pawed the air in pleased expectancy. Chris threw the fish straight up: it fell back into the open jaws of its rightful owner, who swallowed it whole and waited for more. But Chris knelt rigid by its side: the mother bear, having watched this performance, motionless, now rolled slowly up to them, and smelt of Chris. He dared not look at her: he merely felt a huge terrible yellow-white Presence over him. One blow of her paw, and his brains would pour out over the ice. Stiff with terror he groped in his pocket for the other piece of fish—found it and threw it on the ground beside him. The terrible black nose left him—the 1000 lbs of bear backed off a few inches and the piece of fish shot down the long black narrow tongue, and disappeared. Chris thanked God for his bearskin coat. If it had been sealskin, she would have torn it off his back and devoured it, and portions of Chris along with it—but the smell of bear, the touch of it on her nose, was evidently not pleasant. She nosed him again—and backed away.

The bear-cub in the meantime had rolled over on its back, and, beating the air with its paws, showed an amiable desire to play. And Chris, with that great shadow towering over him—with its breath almost on his hair—not daring to crawl away lest it should kill him with one blow, cowered there, up against the bear-cub, and let it maul him about: he rolled—he ducked—he took its blows meekly—he dared not hit back—once it gave him a sharp nip on the calf, but he dared not yell. So they tumbled about in the weird light of the midnight sun—for what seemed to Chris an eternity—and it was surely the strangest game ever played by man [illegible] round the three of [illegible]eaved, and beneath them the iceberg floated, floated, floated, north.

Satisfied at last that this black thing her child had found was pleasing to it, the great monarch of the north turned on her heel and shuffled away, and turning a corner of the berg disappeared as silently and swiftly as she had come.

And Chris, now that the suspense was over, buried his face in the bear-cub's side and panted.

CHAPTER III

THE SLEEP OF DEATH

THE next seven days of his life were a period of which Chris never afterward spoke to anyone. He knew it must have been about a week, because his watch was still in his pocket—and toward the end that stopped too, and everything became a weird and timeless dream.

The bears, he figured it out, must have been caught upon the berg by accident, like himself. Their tracks were everywhere, and some of them, frozen into the deep ice like fossil remains, showed that they must have been on the berg before the last cold spell, when what was now hard ice had been soft snow.

That they sustained life with the greatest ease was evident from the roundness of their paunches and the thickness of their fur.

The bear-cub, after that first encounter, had trailed off after its mother, and Chris, some sixth sense telling him that once the bears had forgotten him, the next encounter would prove just as dangerous as the first, made up his mind on the spot to press his victory home and not to let them forget him for a moment. And in his heart there grew already a sneaking desire to make friends with the polar-bear. So, stumbling after them in the weird glow of midnight sun and starlight, Chris rounded the corner of the berg.

It was much less steep on this side. There was a flat beach-like formation, which ran back some ten yards from

the water—old ice, full of pebbles—evidently part broken off some glacier edge. Behind this rose an irregular cliff of ice some twenty feet high—then another ledge, jutting out sharply like a roof—and above that—broken pinnacles of ice—some clear as crystal, catching the red and green and lavender lights of the weird scene around—shimmering like opals, and changing color with the continual motion of the berg. The sun was on this side—a dim red disk on the horizon: across the flat pans of ice out near the horizon a curtain of aurora borealis wavered—pale pink, orange and green. It colored the sea beneath. Chris stood stupified by this splendour. Then he saw the bears. High up under the jutting ledge of icicles and snow, they had scooped out a cave, about six feet high and perhaps ten feet deep; he could see into it plainly. From this cave was a smooth path rubbed in the ice—a shoot about 15 feet long, which the bears had worn, by sliding down on their stomachs to the flat ice beneath.

The huge mother was parading slowly back and forth along the ledge, high above him—the little one trailed at her heels. When he shouted, they both stopped and stared at him as though they had never seen him before. Chris, with his heart in his mouth, sat down on the shelving ice beach, in full sight of them, and waited.

The pangs of hunger assailed him. How long would it be before they took it into their heads to fish?—He tried to remember what he knew of the habits of bears. How long could they go without eating?—and supposing they did catch any?—how would he get it away from them?—would he have to lurk around, in hiding, and eat the scraps they left?—and would they leave any scraps?—Chris remembered the half-wild dogs that used to prowl around the wharves in the fishing village of his boyhood—when the refuse from the whale carcasses was thrown out in great heaps, these dogs would gorge until they burst, rather than leave any. Chris felt suddenly melancholy. The cold bit into him fiercely.

Very well: he would live as the bears lived, and see what came of it. Shaking the stiffness out of his bones, he got up and began to examine the face of the berg. He would dig himself a cave. The moment he moved, the bears stopped their peregrinations along the cliff and watched him. The size of the big one terrified him; he kept his eyes off it and tried to ignore its terrible presence. Climbing and slipping in and out of crevasse and hummock he finally found a deep cleft full of soft snow. It was at such an angle that the dull pink rays of the sun, growing every day a little stronger now, as spring advanced, should hit it squarely, he calculated, for an hour or so in the afternoon.

Finding a sharp long sliver of ice, he began cutting snow blocks, esquimo fashion. This was not hard, for there was a great variety of young and old snow lodged on the berg. He constructed low walls to break the wind, and a roof, keeping the soft snow underneath for a bed, and cementing the cracks between his snow blocks with it. Soon enough it would melt and then freeze into wind proof walls.

This done, he suddenly found his resources at an end. No way to make a fire—no way to dry his stiff damp half frozen clothes. And already his chin was bristly; in a week, if he lived that long, a beard would have begun—that most dreaded of arctic adornments. For when the beard froze, the face froze too.

With a grunt of disgust he burrowed into the soft snow of his cave; it would melt around him from the warmth of his body; then when the wind struck him his damp clothes would freeze again. That was safer than to have them soggy—and now—nothing for it but an endurance test—until the two potentates above, large and small, should condescend to hunt for food. But even with the food question solved, and the bears placated, there was another dan-

ger, and an almost fatal one, hanging over Chris—the probability that before help could reach him he would freeze to death. And having made up his mind to fight for life, he went at it just as methodically as he had when he faced the prospect of dying. Although a terrible drowsiness was stealing over him he fought it off—he exerted every last atom of his already overspent energy into trying to think out how to keep from freezing. Already a slight numbness in his foot was beginning to make itself felt—his heel was frozen. And the cold crept gradually from his heel, up his leg, like the blade of a stealthy sword.

When Chris was a boy, there had been many Greenland esquimos who came down to his native town with the traders, and hung around the wharves. Some of them had picked up Norwegian, and Chris had had many talks with them and had conceived a great curiosity as to how these happy, wonderful people lived. Then, they had seemed to him, in their secret kingdom on the top of the world, nothing short of magicians: the successful battle that they waged against conditions worse than any to be found anywhere else in the world, had thrilled him. But that was long ago. After he became a whaler, he adopted the attitude which most of the world holds toward the esquimos: it was the fashion among whalers to treat them like the dirt under their feet—to ruin them, when possible, with money and whisky, and to sneer and laugh at them at all times, on general principles—the white man's way, when all else fails, of showing his superiority.

And now—what wouldn't Chris have given for one twentieth the lore which the very humblest of these esquimos could have given him, and without which he would undoubtedly perish. He closed his eyes and strained his memory, back to the goodnatured chatter of an old esquimo hunter he had talked to, as a boy, for hours and hours on end.

And gradually, details began to come back to him.

The sheer accident of his owning a bearskin coat was ninety per cent in his favor; in the oilskins and sweaters that most of the whalers on the Diving Lena wore, he wouldn't have stood a chance now.

But from the waist down, it was another matter.

Chris knew that the esquimos wear, for winter, mittens and socks and usually trowsers also, of caribou skin, with the fur side in. And in summer, sealskin, which gets wet quicker and does not freeze so readily. And Chris was stranded in perhaps the worst combination that could have happened— two pair of woolen socks, leather shoes over them and sealskin trowsers with all the fur worn off them—a pair which had been discarded by a whaler on the ship as ausgespield, and bought by Chris in exchange for a long knife which he would have given his eye teeth to have had back at this moment. The problem was how to keep this thin outfit dry—what was it, now, that he had seen that old esquimo do, one freezing day, when his thin sealskin leggins had got wet? —it came back to him gradually. The old man had been helping the fishermen in with a net—he had slipped kneedeep in the water—had dropped his end of the net, and rushing to a snow bank nearby had stood in it, grinning, while the men cursed him from the boat. When he stepped out, his wet leggins were frozen stiff by the sudden contact with the snow. All this had made almost no impression on Chris at the time —now he saw that the snow must act as a sort of blotter—absorbing the water out of the material before it had time to reach the skin—and at the same time freezing in the skin, and thereby making it more or less waterproof.

Before he could do this, he would have somehow to get his trowsers and leggins dried out—and then—the utmost vigilance—and endless and patient care to keep himself dry. He stripped

off his woolen mits, which clung like wet fungus to his hands, and thrust his half frozen hands inside his bearskin—and with a sigh of exhaustion, fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

A FIGHT FOR LIFE

He was awakened by a tremendous weight which was crushing him.

His first impression was that the iceberg had fallen in upon him; he choked for breath—he struggled—he tried to push the weight off his face—it moved.

Terror paralyzed him. The bear was eating him. He waited motionless to feel its fangs—a minute—an hour—an eternity. Still the dead weight. He freed one hand—got the snow out of his eyes—and wriggled violently. The weight rolled off him sidewise. He sat up, panting, shaking the snow away—and wriggled out from under—

It was the bear-cub, who, discovering that its new plaything was warm, had lain down on top of him and gone to sleep. It was only by accident that he had not been smothered to death. Even now it did not wake—no doubt mistaking him for its mother—it only rolled its 300 pounds slightly to the left; up against his snow wall, and covering its nose with its huge paws, puffed slightly through its nose. It radiated warmth like a furnace, and Chris, weak from lack of food, and with a sudden grateful sense of heat and companionship, huddled up against its soft fat body and slept again.

But not for long. Waking suddenly, he felt the bear-cub scrambling out of their shelter apparently in a great hurry. He crawled out on all fours just in time to see it galloping off down the ice foot. Following post-haste, he rounded to the other side of the berg, and his heart leaped expectantly. The final test of his chances for life was about to take place. The polar bear was fishing. Head down, it crouched like a great yellow-white ice hummock, on the edge of the berg, and waited, motionless. The little one tumbled over it, prowled around—impatient and expectant.

The mother reached down with a sudden lunge—a fish gleamed for a moment on her huge talons—the next instant she had snapped it into her mouth. Three times this happened. The fourth time, she missed it and it fell on the ice—the cub devoured it instantly. She brought up two more—the cub ate them; then rolling on to its back, it waved its paws gently to and fro in the air. Chris's heart sank. But he hung on to hope. The she-bear was still nosing along the water's edge. Now she was down on her belly again—now she lunged down again; then with one sweep of forearm and claws he saw her catch and toss well up onto the ice, a 400 pound seal—and with a forefoot on its back she broke its head off with one jerk.

Chris knelt spellbound. With one regal gesture this arctic monarch had caught enough food to last all three of them for a week. There now followed an orgy. Chris knelt under the shadow of the ice ledge and watched it. Seal blubber, skin and bone were scattered over the ice in every direction; the great carcass was nosed hither and thither—torn into strips—wasted—some of it fell back into the water—the bear cub, stuffed to bursting point, lay down in the warm blubber and rolled. Its mother ate steadily. At the end of half an hour, the seal was a third gone. It was quite evident that they would not leave the carcass. Probably they would go on eating till sleep overcame them, and then lie down where they were. A horrible vision of their consuming the whole seal at one sitting began to possess Chris. So strong did this conviction become that desperation overcame common sense; again with the facts, against him, he took a chance. Crawling slowly toward them over the ice on all fours, he reached out his hand and seized a piece of blubber. The bear-cub who was nearest him, made a

grab for it but missed it; the mother stopped eating and raised her flat, white head. There was a terrible pause. Chris lost his nerve and threw the piece of blubber toward her. She took her small black eyes from him slowly—looked at the blubber—went to it, smelt of it—then deliberately turning her back on him, she left it lying there and went on eating the piece of seal she already had.

Chris fell upon the blubber and ate and ate ravenously. New life surged back into him—he could hear the warm blood singing in his ears—the cold around seemed to grow less every moment—exultation filled his heart. He had won. Twice the bear-cub attacked him—the second time it gave him an ugly scratch, but he got away with a piece of blubber big enough to last him two days—and crawling on all fours, he left them to their feast. Out of sight of them, he leaped to his feet and ran—ran for sheer joy of living—back to his ice cave.

How to bury the food so that the bears would not instantly smell it and dig it up, was a problem. He had seen what bears can do to the stone cairns the esquimos build over their winter supplies. He had heard of esquimo corpses buried five feet deep, that the bears had found.

His eye traveled along the jagged ledges. Not a place on the whole floating mass of ice, where a man's hands could dig a hole—and to hide it under snow was futile. They would find it in a moment—those two black noses, traveling back and forth all day and night.

He knew that there were probably caves worn by the water on the underneath side of the berg—below water level—the kind of deep, circular holes where seals hide to bear their young—but to find those it would be necessary to dive—not once, but many times—and one plunge into that icy water would have meant probable death, or at the very mildest, water soaked clothes with no hope of drying them. His eye, made keen by desperation, traveled slowly up the sides of the berg. Should he wedge his prize deep into an ice crack?—No: for their long furry arms would scratch it out. But above the ice ledge, where the berg split into fantastic pinnacles, there jutted out a narrow arm of ice—and from it hung a cluster of icicles, the largest hanging down six feet. If Chris could wedge his blubber up in between those icicles—

He saw at a glance the arm of ice would not hold the bears. And it was far above their reach even though they stood upright on their hind legs. The question was—would the arm of ice hold *him*?—It hung out at a treacherous point, where the berg beneath sloped straight into the sea—if he fell—he would have no way of stopping himself. Working against time, he began to make a wall on the slippery berg, inside of which he calculated he could fall with safety. It was hard work on that shelving slope of ice. Having made it, he tested it by rolling against it. It held.

With the hunk of blubber buttoned inside his coat, he began the ascent. Twice he slipped and nearly fell; once a piece of the berg, grown rotten from exposure, came off in his hand. When he was half way up, the piece of blubber got loose under his coat and dropped. Fortunately his improvised wall saved it. He climbed down after it and began over again. In the end, he made it. The arm of ice held him. He wedged the blubber up between the icicles, each one as thick as his arm—and there he left it, suspended between heaven and earth.

The only danger was that a sudden thaw would melt it out from between them—he would have to watch the temperature.

Exhausted from his recent labors, and with a full stomach he crawled into his cave. Should he block the entrance so the bear-cub could not enter?—No—he'd take a chance. He had a sneaking hope it WOULD come back.

But then a terrible thought came to him. Suppose the mother bear took it into her head to sleep with him?—Suppose a thousand pounds of bear instead of three hundred, suddenly lay down on him in the night—the thought brought him to his feet. And no flimsy barricade would keep her out, either. There was only one safety; it was to tear down the wall of his house and to move it nearer to the other wall—which was the berg itself—to make the cave so narrow in other words that she couldn't get in.

Dizzy with sleepiness and exhaustion, Chris dragged himself out and set to work. He left the wall as it was, built another, a foot thick, inside it—the two together made a barricade which the bear would hardly bother to tear down unless she were either hungry or angry. He prayed God she would become neither, and crawling in, more dead than alive, he fell instantly to sleep.

CHAPTER V

. . . "AND WATCHED HIM DIE"

From now on, the interest of Chris's strange days and nights began to shift. The food question solved itself in an irregular sort of way. The bears discovered the new refrigerator, in the course of time, and Chris spent many amusing hours watching them standing on their hind legs under the icicles, pawing the air and sniffing. They of course climbed up to the shelving edge where the arm of ice was—but instinct warned them that it would not bear their weight; after one or two attempts the bear-cub gave it up. The mother, more persistent, tried to break the arm off—flat on her belly she would give it a succession of mighty blows—blows any one of which would have killed a man or a seal. But she could get no real purchase on the slippery pinnacles of the berg and finally she too gave it up.

After his store was gone Chris was without food for two days. The bears had removed the last vestige of the seal and had even licked the whole surface of the berg where its remains had been scattered.

But just as he began to despair, they fell to fishing again, and he got enough fish away from the bear-cub to keep him going for two days more. So it went, and in the long, long hours, when the three of them roamed about the berg, and the stars wheeled over them in the immensity of the timeless sky, Chris, partly through fear and loneliness, partly through curiosity, began to make approaches of friendship to the great bear. At first they were rejected. For whole days the bear would seem unaware of his existence. She would play with her cub for hours on end, and strange were their antics to watch.

They played tag, traveling at top speed around and around the berg with that comic shuffling gait which always made them look as though they had just been kicked in the rear. Tiring of this, they would suddenly stand up on their hind quarters, facing each other, solemnly waving their snouts to left and right, and sniffing the breeze.

Sometimes in the middle of playing, the mother would get tired, and rushing to the nearest pile of snow, she would lie down, and with a few grand sweeps of her great forearm and hands, would cover herself up with snow, with only her black button of a nose showing.

Sometimes they went swimming, and Chris would stand panic stricken on the edge, thinking they had deserted him. Once they did manage to get on a small berg, and Chris, seeing them floating rapidly away from him was about to plunge into the sea after them in desperation, when before his astonished eyes the berg, which was small and old and honeycombed underneath, turned over, hurling the bears into the sea. They swam back, looking very frightened and indignant, and were so terrified by the experience that they rolled themselves together in a solid ball inside their cave and did not come out again for two days and nights, while

Chris froze and starved and swore outside.

Then there came a calm—a sudden sharp promise of spring. The dark lilac sky which until now had signified open water ahead, changed overnight, to a succession of light streaks on the clouds. This was the reflection of ice—fields of pack ice—and it meant that the drift south had begun. Chris did not know whether to be alarmed or otherwise. Any halt in their eternal drift northwest seemed a relief—yet according to his calculations they should have hit the western shore of Kane basin long before this—yet there was no sight of land.

The winter mists began to lift—faint blue overhead—which meant the sun was coming back—and the pools that collected on the iceberg wherever there was a hollow, were a delicate yellow, set in snow which reflected the pink of the sun, and each pool edged with emerald green ice. The water in these pools was at first salt, but as the berg grew older and the outside surface got worn away, Chris found these melting pools becoming fresh water. The bears drank at them always—and if one was not fresh they would search and search for one that was. They were very particular. One day Chris heard the "tweet, tweet" of an ivory gull overhead and he knew that spring had come.

It was on this day that he wrung the first gesture of real friendship from the polar bear. Hearing fearful bellowings around the corner of his cave he came out to find the bear-cub with its paw caught in a crack of ice—how it had ever wedged it in there, or why, he could not imagine, but it was held as in a vise, and had swollen so from the cub's struggles that it seemed likely to come off entirely.

The mother was in great distress. She licked the ice all around the crack in an effort to melt it down, but it was old ice, and her cold rasping tongue made no impression on it.

Chris approached cautiously. He had never seen her in such a nervous, anxious state, and was not sure of his reception. He edged closer and closer—closer than he had ever been to her before—arming himself first with a sharp stone which he had found one day embedded in the ice, and had spent hours of labor bringing to something resembling an edge. With this he began to hack away the ice from around the caught paw. At his approach the mother bear hissed and backed away. He looked her straight between the eyes and came on. While he worked she stood five feet off, swinging her huge body sidewise in a state of terrible excitement—never taking her beady eyes from him for a moment. The bear-cub howled and bellowed and roared. At last after what seemed an eternity, his paw suddenly came free, and he fell upon his back and rolled with pain. The mother began at once to lick the wounded paw, and Chris, nervous as a cat at having the monster so near him, backed off and made a quick exit. Half an hour later as he sat by the floe edge, staring out over the water, he heard a soft and dreadful sound behind him; he turned too late. The bear was upon him: walking directly to where he sat, she lay down on her stomach beside him, and plunging her great arms into the water which was near them at this point, she began to fish. The first three fish she ate as soon as she caught them. The fourth one she flipped onto the ice without turning her head. Chris reached out and grabbed it, twisting its head off.

The bear stopped fishing, sat back on her haunches and turning her melancholy, gentle eyes upon him, rocked slowly from side to side.

Chris parted the fish in two, and putting one half as far away from himself as he could reach, ate the other. The bear accepted the fragment of fish from him and ate it slowly and gravely.

Had she meant to catch that fish for him, or was it accident?

He could not doubt that she HAD meant to share it with him. He turned

and looked at her squarely, and with a sudden deep surge of loneliness, he put out his hand and stroked her huge soft neck, just behind the ear.

"Good old girl," he said softly, "good old pal."

The orange rays of the midnight sun touched her pale, kindly face. She looked at him, steadily, with her dark gentle eyes, and getting up, after a moment, paddled softly away with slow, enormous strides.

After that, his fear of her died. He moved about the berg freely—no longer peering around every corner to see if she were there—his dreams no longer haunted by her huge faint yellow form. And she accepted him, gravely, and with a sort of dignified wonder, as just part of the moving phenomenon of sky and sea and floating ice.

Sometimes, when they all sat through the night, scattered over the berg in whatever nooks and crannies protected them best from the wind, Chris used to wonder about her profoundly.

How old was this mysterious animal? He had seen many polar bears in his time but never one so large, so patient, or so strong. Had she ever seen a man before?—there were no scars on her that he could find—was it possible that she had spent a hundred years or more of her long life floating through this wilderness unafraid, unattacked—unchallenged?

Sometimes, with the weird northern lights flickering over her head, and the fierce arctic wind blowing all her fur on end, she would stand on the peak of the iceberg, looking out over the waste, like some ancient fur-clad viking. What sights had she seen?—In what tragedies and comedies had she born her silent part, on this vast polar sea?

When he came back to the berg, after long weary hours on the ice floe searching, searching for a sign of real land, or a village, he would return to find her standing erect on the edge of the berg, looking in his direction anxiously, as though she were waiting for him.

He got into the habit of waving to her and shouting.

"Old girl—old girl!"

He often touched her now; once, on a particularly cold and bitter night, he had crept up to her where she sat motionless under a ledge, and used her for a wind shield, as insignificant, against that thousand pound mass of fur, as though he had been a child. Stupified by the cold he had fallen asleep, leaning up against her; when he woke he was face down on the ice; she had got up and sauntered off while he slept.

And then—all of a sudden, as though by magic—a breeze with a strange smell to it—and land. The bears scented it an hour before Chris. They ran up and down the edge of the berg in excitement. A floating spar passed them—a piece of some explorer's ship no doubt—Chris, at the risk of his life, caught it, and gave it to the bear cub to play with, and she lay flat on her back, full of young seal fat and joy, and played guitar with it—caressed it—spurned it disdainfully with her great soft hind foot—took it in her teeth and waved it slowly about.

What was that black speck moving along the shore?—Chris held his breath and watched—another—and another—moving specks. Was it deer—was it musk ox?—climbing to the top of the highest look-out on the berg, he saw in the distance an esquimo village—the moving spots were men—

With a cry of joy he pointed, shouting at the bears, who looked up at him idly and then away again—the next moment there was a cracking sound—the bridge of ice on which he stood gave way—he plunged down twenty feet, at the spot where the berg was steepest, and was hurled into the icy water with a broken arm.

Faint with pain, and unable to swim, he shouted again and again. The bears, hearing the commotion, came around the edge of the berg—stared a minute at their floundering companion, whom

they had never seen in the water before, and then sitting down, regarded him with solemn interest.

Chris choked with mingled fear, pain and exasperation. The calm indifference of the animals at the sight of men was a shock to him—and their mild surprise at his present plight seemed out of keeping with the rare intelligence he had grown to expect of them, in every instance where their own safety was concerned.

He clung desperately to the jagged pieces of ice along the berg foot. The icy water was eating into his very veins—his broken arm throbbed and jumped—if he lost hold with his one good arm—a horrible vision of drawing, right here at the very end, with help in sight, made him cry out in agony. The old girl would save him—he was sure of that—if he could only make her understand in time. She was sitting within three feet of him—but the drop between them was too high and too slippery for him to climb. He clung desperately to his edge of cruel, treacherous ice—with one reach of her great forearm she could haul him up out of danger. And there she sat, motionless.

He called to her—he appealed to her with every endearing name he could think of—

"Help, old girl—help—HELP—for God's sake"—he felt his strength going. He began to edge along the berg, seeking a place less steep—fainting with the pain in his arm. The great bear, watching him gravely, kindly, got up and followed him.

Then he found a place—a nick in the ice big enough to fit his foot into—he felt himself pulling inch by inch out of the water—those great shoulder-muscles standing him in good stead now—a moment more and he'd be out—

"Its all right old girl" he panted, touched, now that the strain was over, by her lack of understanding—"all right—ugh—I know you meant—"

As he drew himself gasping on to the ice, there was a sudden hiss—he looked in time to see the great bear rise on all fours—her jaws opened above him in a silent snarl—her great forearm shot out, once, striking at him, straight from the shoulder.

It was enough. Chris fell back into the polar sea, with three ribs smashed, and his shoulder torn open into a great red wound.

A wide green stretch of water grew between him and the floating berg—the last thing he saw, as the icy water rushed into his eyes, was a pale yellow form, with a black nose and melancholy eyes, that sat on the floe-edge, motionless, and watched him die.

* * * *

He didn't die. The little colony of whalers, whose ship rode at anchor around the glacier edge, had seen him just in time.

He came to, as they lifted him out of the boat, and looked into the eyes of the first mate—a man he had sailed with once upon a time.

"Chris Hanssen," shouted the mate, "well, I'll be . . . ! Where the hell ye bin?"

Chris, with the little strength left in him, pointed with his good arm.

"I'm hunting bears," he mumbled—"iceberg—two of 'em—keep them—in—sight—I—want—them—*alive*"—and then he fainted.

* * * *

"I hope," said Miss Miriam Reedy, as she passed Chris and his bear cage again, on her way out of the circus tent, "that you'll try to make friends with your bears some day, Mr. Hanssen."

The Swede turned his steady, lonely, blue eyes on her without answering, and after she had gone he took his spike and rammed it through the bars of the bear cage. The old polar bear struck at it feebly—cowering in her corner, and looking at him with her small, melancholy eyes.

"Did ye hear what the lady said, old girl?" mumbled Chris, between his teeth.

But the polar bear made no sign.

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